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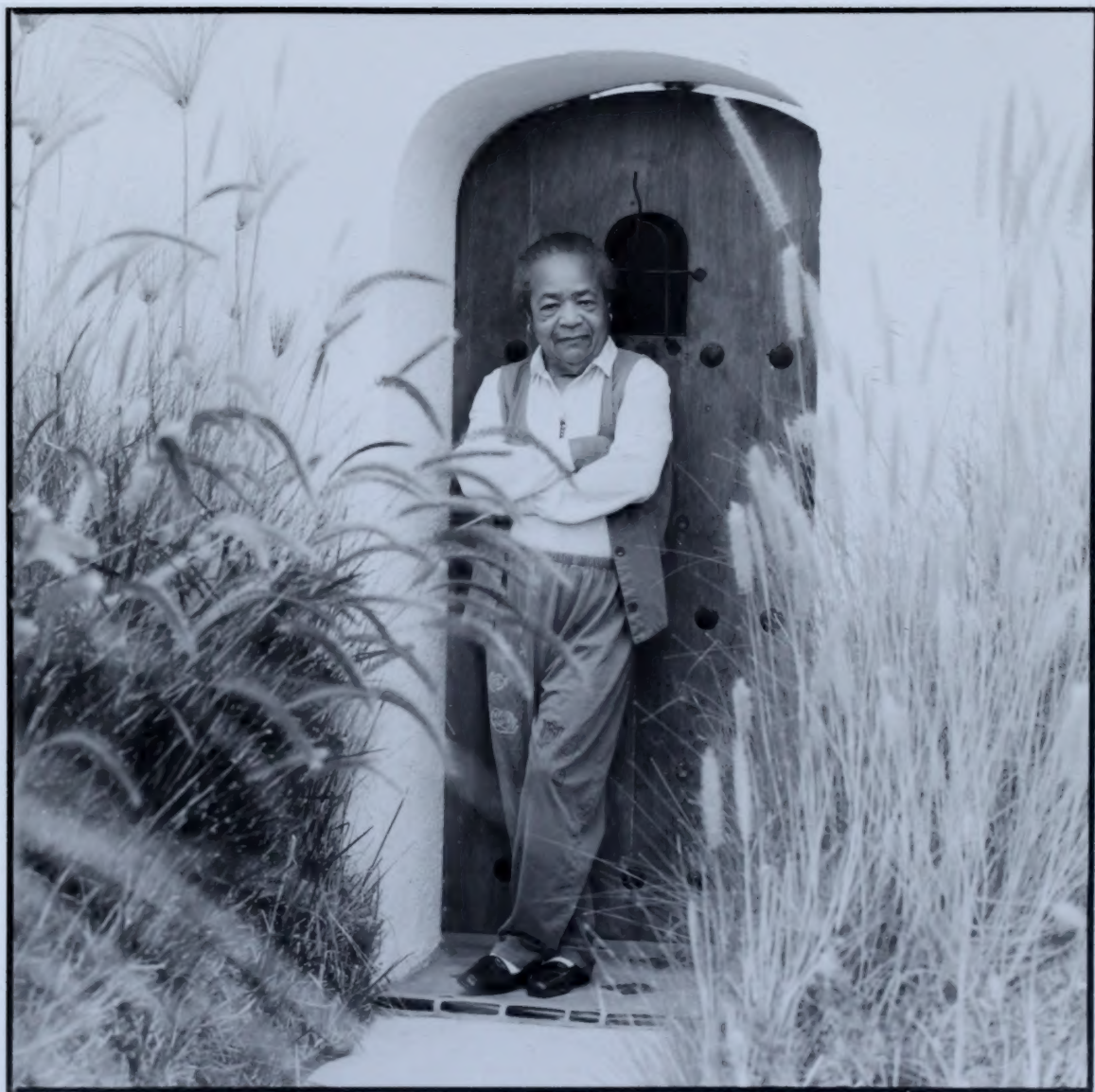














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### IMAGE AND BELIEF

Samella Lewis

Interviewed by Richard Cándida Smith

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None

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Frontispiece: Samella Lewis. Photograph by Robert Hale, courtesy of Samella Lewis.





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Richard Cándida Smith, Associate Professor of History and Director of the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan, interviewed Samella Lewis at her home in Los Angeles, California. A total of 14.83 hours were recorded. The transcript was edited by Katherine P. Smith.





## CURRICULUM VITAE

SAMELLA LEWIS

Born: February 27, 1924, New Orleans, Louisiana

### EDUCATION:

1951 Ph.D., Ohio State University

1948 M.A., Ohio State University

1945 B.S., Hampton University

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE:

1970–1984 Professor of Art History, Scripps College (Claremont Colleges)

1958–1968 Professor of Art History, University of the State of New York (SUNY), Plattsburgh

1966–1967 Associate Professor of Art History, California State University, Long Beach

1953–1958 Professor and Chair, Fine Arts Department, Florida A. & M. University

1948–1953 Associate Professor, Morgan State University

1946–1947 Instructor, Hampton Institute

### ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE:

College Art Association of America: 1990–1994

National Endowment for the Arts: Project Director, 1980–

Fulbright Fellowship Awards, National Screening Committee: Far East Studies, 1977–1980

*The International Review of African American Art*: Editor, 1976–

Museum of African American Art: Founder, 1976

Clark Humanities Museum (Scripps College): Director, 1976–1984

National Conference of Artists: National Co-Chairperson, 1972–1974

Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Coordinator of Education, 1968–1969

### POST DOCTORAL FELLOWSHIPS:

1996–1997 Distinguished Scholar, The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities



- 1981 National Research Council/Ford Foundation Fellow
- 1965 New York State/Ford Foundation Fellow
- 1964 National Defense Education Act Fellow
- 1962 Fulbright Fellowship

#### SELECTED HONORS AND AWARDS:

- 1998 Doctor of Humanities, Dillard University, New Orleans, LA
- 1996 Honorary Doctor of Humanities, Bennett College
- 1995 UNICEF Award for the Visual Arts
- 1993 Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, University of Cincinnati
- 1993 Charles White Lifetime Achievement Award
- 1992 Lifetime Achievement Award/Brandywine Workshop
- 1990 Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters, Hampton University
- 1990 "Legends In Our Time Tribute," *Essence Magazine*
- 1989 Honor Award for Outstanding Achievement in Visual Arts, Women's Caucus for the Arts
- 1988 National Conference of Artists Achievement Award
- 1986 Citation for Distinguished Alumnae, Ohio State University
- 1985 Women For, Los Angeles Achievement in the Visual Arts Award
- 1984 Professor Emerita, Art History, Scripps College
- 1984 Scripps College Faculty Recognition Award
- 1984 Vesta Award, Women's Building
- 1983 Who's Who in America
- 1983 Who's Who in the West
- 1983 Senate of California Special Award
- 1982 Who's Who in Black America
- 1976 Honorary Doctor of Humanities, Chapman College

#### SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS:

- 1999 Chicago Parks Districts South Shore Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
- 1999 Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles, CA
- 1999 Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts, Eatonville, FL
- 1997 Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA
- 1997 Parish Gallery, Georgetown, MD
- 1997 Bomani Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1996 Bill Hodges Gallery, New York, NY
- 1995 N.C.A. Gallery, Detroit, MI
- 1995 Junior Black Academy of Arts & Letters, Dallas, TX





- 1994 Bennett College, Greensboro, NC
- 1993 Morehouse College, Atlanta, GA
- 1990 Delta Art Center, Winston Salem, NC
- 1990 Hampton University, Hampton, VA
- 1986 West Dade Regional Library, Miami, FL
- 1984 Museum of African American Art, Los Angeles, CA
- 1981 University of California, San Diego, CA
- 1981 Pasadena City College, Pasadena, CA
- 1972 Rainbow Sign Gallery, Berkeley, CA

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1999 Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
- 1999 Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA
- 1999 Howard University Gallery, Washington, D.C.
- 1999 Bomani Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1999 Rollins College, Winter Park, FL
- 1999 Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Ithaca, NY
- 1998 Art in Embassy Program, Geneva, Switzerland
- 1998 Museum in Printing History, Houston, TX
- 1997 Brandywine Art Gallery/Brandywine Workshop, Philadelphia, PA
- 1996 Stella Jones Gallery, New Orleans, LA
- 1996 Satori Fine Art Gallery, Chicago, IL
- 1996 San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, TX
- 1995 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA
- 1995 Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
- 1995 Montgomery Art Gallery, Pomona College, Claremont, CA
- 1995 Brandywine Workshop, Traveling Exhibition, Philadelphia, PA
- 1995 Studio Museum in Harlem, 25th Year, Traveling Exhibition, New York, NY
- 1994 Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT
- 1993 Bomani Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1993 American Wind Symphony Barge (traveling exhibition)
- 1993 Long Beach Museum, Long Beach, CA
- 1992 DuSable Museum of African American History, Chicago, IL
- 1992 Newark Museum, Newark, NJ
- 1990 North Dade Regional Library, Miami, FL
- 1989 10th Annual Exhibition/Women's Caucus for the Arts, Vorpall Gallery, San Francisco, CA
- 1989 Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA



- 1987 California State University, Long Beach, CA
- 1984 High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA
- 1983 The Print Club, Philadelphia, PA
- 1981 Mandeville Gallery, University of California, San Diego, CA
- 1980 University Union Gallery, California Polytechnic University, Pomona, CA
- 1980 Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition, United States and Canada

#### COLLECTIONS:

Atlanta University Gallery of Contemporary Art  
 Baltimore Museum of Fine Arts  
 Hampton University Collection  
 High Museum of Art  
 Howard University Museum  
 Johnson Publications Collections  
 The Oakland Museum  
 Ohio State University  
 The Viktor Lowenfeld Memorial Gallery  
 Virginia Museum of Fine Art

#### FILMS PRODUCED:

"The Black Artist," 16mm/color/sound/28 minutes  
 "John Outterbridge: Black Artist," 16mm/color/sound/21 minutes  
 "Bernie Casey: Black Artist," 16mm/color/sound/21 minutes  
 "To Follow A Star: The Sculpture of Richmond Barthé," video/color/sound/21 minutes  
 "Feathers of Wood: The Art of Charles Hutchison," video/color/sound/21 minutes

#### SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:

*African American Art and Artists.* Berkeley: UC Press, 1994.

"Elizabeth Catlett, Works on Paper, 1944–1992." Essay. Hampton University Press, 1993.

"Elizabeth Catlett." *Journal of the Paint World* 16, no. 4 (Fall, 1993).

*African American Art for Young People.* Los Angeles: Hancraft Studios, 1991.





*Art: African American.* (revised) Los Angeles: Hancraft Studios, 1990.

*The Art of Elizabeth Catlett.* Los Angeles: Museum of African American Art and Hancraft Studios, 1984.

"Black America." *Centro de Estudio Economicos y Sociales del Tercer Mundo AC.*, Mexico, 1982.

*Art: African American.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

"Cuba." *Black Scholar*, (Summer, 1977).

"The Street Art of Black America." Exxon USA, Public Affairs Department, Third Quarter, 1973.

*Art and Esthetics: An Agenda for the Future.* Contributor. Conference, co-sponsored by Cemel, Inc., and the Education Program of the Aspen Institute for Humanities Studies, 1969.

*Black Artists on Art, Vol. I and Vol. II.* Contemporary Crafts, 1969. Distributed by Hancraft Studios. Revised, 1976.

SELECTED CATALOGS AND CURATORSHIPS:

1999 *Jazz . . . A Montage of a Dream.* American Jazz Museum, Kansas City, MO.

1999 *When the Spirit Moves: African American Dance in History and Art.* Catalog essay, curator. Four venues: Springfield, OH., Detroit, MI, Atlanta, GA., and Washington, D.C.

1999 *William Pajaud: My New Orleans.* The California African American Museum, Los Angeles. Guest curator.

1995 *Caribbean Visions: Contemporary Paintings and Drawings* (traveling exhibition/national and international).

1995 *Two Sculptures, Two Eras: Richmond Barthé and Richard Hunt* (traveling exhibition for Arts America, European travel through 1998).

1990 *Celebrations Sights and Sounds of Being.* Fisher Gallery, University of



Southern California.

- 1989 *African Presence in the Art of the Caribbean.* Museum of Art and History, San Juan, Puerto Rico.
- 1988 *Jacob Lawrence, Paintings and Drawings.* Arts America.
- 1987 *Richard Hunt, Sculptures and Drawings.* Arts America.
- 1983 *Artists Teachers.* Museum of African American Art/University of Southern California Atelier, Santa Monica Place.
- 1982 *Wildlife Sculpture, A Bayou Heritage.* California African American Museum.
- 1981 *The Media, Style and Tradition of Ten California Artists.* The California African American Museum.





SESSION ONE: 18 MAY, 1997

[Tape I, Side One]

SMITH: Where we usually start out is pretty straightforward: when and where were you born?

LEWIS: Okay, that's a problem.

SMITH: That's a problem? [laughter]

LEWIS: No, that's not a problem. I was late getting my birth certificate. Apparently I was born in New Orleans and moved to a place called Ponchatoula, in Greater New Orleans, where my father [Samuel Sanders] lived. My mother [Rachel Taylor Sanders] was not too well, so I was born in the charity hospital in New Orleans on February 27, 1924. My birth certificate comes from New Orleans, because the other place is in what they call Tangipahoa parish, and the birth certificate would have come from Amite, so it's not a problem, but it's a little confusing. During the time when I was born, most African Americans didn't really have birth certificates, you know.

SMITH: The state of Louisiana wasn't concerned with it?

LEWIS: No, it wasn't concerned with the fact that we were there or who we were or anything of that sort. So, according to my birth certificate I was born, strangely enough, in "Louisiana."

SMITH: Oh, okay.

LEWIS: That's it. They don't say where. It's just Louisiana.



SMITH: That's not a big state, but it's big enough. [laughter]

LEWIS: But I do know that my early years were spent in Ponchatoula, until I was about four years old.

SMITH: And Ponchatoula is on the outskirts of New Orleans?

LEWIS: It's fifty miles from the center of New Orleans.

SMITH: And then your family moved into town?

LEWIS: No, no, my mother moved into town.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

LEWIS: My mother is not from that area, she's from the grand bayou, the Bayou Teche area, but she divorced my father and moved into the city.

SMITH: Do you have brothers and sisters?

LEWIS: I had three sisters—only one is alive now—and one half brother.

SMITH: So your mother moved you—

LEWIS: Well, she didn't quite do that. She moved to New Orleans, and apparently because she left the home, our father got custody of us, but because I was very young, four years old, and he was a father with four girls, he didn't have too much of a choice but to send me to New Orleans. But he didn't send me to my mother's home, he sent me to his brother's home. So I was with his brother and his brother's wife until I was about eight years old, and then I went to stay with my mother.

SMITH: What kind of work did your mother do?





LEWIS: My mother was a seamstress. She worked in the French Quarter with a woman who did really fine sewing. When she first went to New Orleans she worked as a domestic, but she was always a good seamstress, and she got the job with this woman in the French Quarter and spent most of her life working with her. She was about eighty-two years old and still a seamstress when we moved her out here. She lived until she was ninety-two. She was in good health, but she was killed. The man across the street from her was trying to kill his wife because she was getting ready to divorce him, and he killed three other people instead.

SMITH: Oh, that's terrible.

LEWIS: He was eighty-two years old. My mother was locking her door, getting ready to go to church, and he shot her. Then he shot his step-daughter and killed her, and my mother's landlady came to see what was going on, and he killed her. That was about seven years ago.

SMITH: It's so pointless.

LEWIS: Absolutely. Just, you know, one of those things. But she was quite an active person, made quilts and beautiful crocheted things. I have some of them. She could go and look at something in a window and go home and make it.

SMITH: When you were younger, did you think of what she was doing as art in some way?

LEWIS: Well, that's interesting, because I thought of her as doing these things and I



appreciated them, but I never thought of any of it as art. I would go to the French Quarter and see some works in the galleries and the museum, and I thought that was art, but most of the other things I didn't see as art. It's a good question. But I did appreciate what was going on. You have to also remember that I was thinking of art as being what I was told was art. I always appreciated it, but I never thought of it as art until later, when I used to go to this man up here, on the wall, Mr. Butler [pointing to carving] He's a hundred years old now. I didn't think of that as art because I knew him, and I knew the duck decoy carvers; that was just something they did. He didn't think of it as art; he thought of it as something he had to do because he made a promise when his wife was ill with pneumonia or something. He said he would dedicate himself to doing what he could do best, and he thought he could carve and do things of this sort best, and he didn't have to work in the fields—that kind of labor. So this to him was not art. He wasn't an artist; he was one who was fulfilling a promise. We used all the things that my mother made. They were useful and they were beautiful, but there was nothing that we hung on the wall to say, "appreciate it." But we did appreciate the spreads and the quilts on the bed. They were so beautiful.

SMITH: What section in New Orleans did you live in?

LEWIS: All over. First I lived in the uptown section, where Xavier University [of Louisiana] is now, and then we moved downtown, and then we moved uptown on Robinson Street, which is off of St. Charles. We finally ended up on Gentilly, which





is out there where Dillard University is, but beyond that we were across the canal and closer to the lakefront. We stayed there longer than any other period. My mother built a house in Gentilly.

SMITH: Did you go to public schools?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. I went to Tommy Lafon Elementary School, and then to J. W. Hoffman Junior High School, and then McDonogh 35 Senior High School on Rampart Street, which was notorious, you know.

SMITH: I think it still is, actually.

LEWIS: Oh no, it's cleaned up now—a lot of big hotels there. But it was a good high school. The principal of the high school was Mr. Alexis, and I'll never forget him. I don't know if he was a Ph.D. or not, but if we did anything that he thought was terrible, he would put us in the army, because he had been an army captain or lieutenant or something, I don't know. He would make us march up and down the hallway, but he was still a good principal. He was concerned about us.

We had great teachers there, really; it wasn't like public schools are now, it was one where teachers had time to work with you, and they were really dedicated. We had everything from Paul Lawrence Dunbar to Shakespeare. It was a pretty good education, and we knew that the teachers cared, we really did. The classrooms were not overcrowded. We're talking about the forties, so it was a good experience. I remember when my class graduated the principal cried, and to see this man that we



thought was awful cry was something, you know? I remember that we had our photographs taken by a Mr. Bedou, who I learned later was a very famous photographer.

So things happened in New Orleans that probably wouldn't have happened in most other places. We were able to go to Xavier and see important people, and go to Dillard and see famous people, and go to the YWCA and the YMCA. Jacob Lawrence was down there doing his migration series, and Elizabeth Catlett was there, and Charles White—they married in New Orleans I think, or they married in Chicago and came back soon after, one of the two. But it was a very rich experience, a very rich place.

SMITH: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

LEWIS: Strangely enough, in junior high school I very much liked algebra and physics. Even in high school I liked physics better than algebra, because I didn't quite like the geometry teacher. We moved from algebra to geometry. I think I would have maintained a real interest in it had the teacher been less . . . well, had he been kinder, let's put it that way. I was more into the sciences. I liked the other subjects but I was able to get more out of the sciences. I was doing English and history, but mathematically, in terms of dealing with forms and shapes, I was able to do geometry and algebra without too much problem, even though they were challenging. So that's what I was involved with mostly.



I used to run around with two or three other students who were very bright. One was a musician and one was an artist, Warren Kenner—you saw the portrait I painted of him. He was an artist. Another friend, Harold Ballard, was more into sciences. He's a heart specialist now, teaches at Columbia University and lives in New York, of course. We all enjoyed exchanging ideas, we didn't just play. One friend is an archivist at Southern University now. She was at the Amistad [Research Center, Tulane University]. We all seemingly did things that were of an educational nature, and we enjoyed ourselves. We walked to school every morning. We started out in elementary school together, went through high school, and then went to different colleges. We didn't lose track of each other, we just went our separate ways.

SMITH: Well, because New Orleans is a big city and had two Negro colleges, it sounds like it was possible for you to have the kind of intellectual life that you wouldn't have gotten if you had been in most other places in the South.

LEWIS: Right, right.

SMITH: You could work around the whole system of racial restrictions.

LEWIS: Right. I studied in the French Quarter with Mr. Alfredo Galli, an Italian immigrant who had lived in Paris. He was quite a famous portrait painter. His lady friend, who he said was his secretary, was a black woman. People were intermingling there more so than in other places I think, so it was a very mixed population. If you





go to the Cabildo, where they have the historical records, you'll see that a lot of the pages are torn out because they probably showed some white people as black, and certain families didn't want to be identified, you know. But it was very difficult to discriminate unless you knew the person, because at Dillard, and at Xavier too, I know there were a lot of blonds who were black. That was a part of the whole color caste system that they once had there; they called them the Creole population, but they were the mulatto population more than the Creole population. The Arcadians were quite dark, and the French in New Orleans were very tan, so it wasn't as easy to discriminate as it was in other places where the African American population was brown or dark brown, or even light brown. In New Orleans, I would say, it's very difficult to tell what 50 percent of the people are.

Still, it was a racially segregated city; it was also a seaport where you had a lot of people coming in, and they tried their best to segregate. The schools were segregated of course. Theaters in and outside of New Orleans were segregated. In the Bayou Teche region there would be a rope in the center of the theater, and on one side of the rope were the children of some of the white landowners, and it was very confusing. A lot of the blacks passed as whites when they wanted to go some place or do something restricted to whites. The only reason you would know that they were black was that you knew the family. It was not as easy to put them in the back of the bus, so to speak, as it would have been in most southern cities. Some of them



had to choose to sit in the back of the bus.

SMITH: And some did.

LEWIS: Some did, that's right. I know at Dillard some of the light-skinned students would sit in the back sometimes and in the front sometimes, and it was the same bus driver who kept seeing all of this and so he had them arrested. A couple of students at Dillard who were doing this were fifteen or sixteen years old, and it was illegal to put them in the jail overnight, and all of this kind of nonsense, so that created a problem. The bus drivers were hesitant to take on the question of who was white and who was black; there was that whole segment that they had to deal with. The "uptown Negroes," as they were called, were identifiable because they were usually the African Americans who were darker skinned or medium brown, but the downtown ones were not as identifiable.

SMITH: So this created a different situation for how you could negotiate and think about these things?

LEWIS: Right, absolutely.

SMITH: What about when you went back to your mother's country, to the Bayou Teche?

LEWIS: That was a real challenge. That's where the Arcadians were. It was a sugar cane area, and you had this whole system of keeping the Arcadians in the middle of the whites and the blacks, or what they call the black Creoles out in that area.





SMITH: Meaning they spoke French rather than English.

LEWIS: They spoke Creole, and they supposedly were at the bottom of the totem pole, with the Arcadians in the middle and the whites at the top. But economically it wasn't that way. The Arcadians and the blacks were both at the bottom, but the Arcadians used to keep the blacks under control so that the white landowners could have clean hands. When I went to visit with my mother's people, I saw a lot of things happening. I saw a lot of persecution. There was so much mixing there in terms of black Creoles and whites. I saw very handsome Creole men being seduced by white women without wanting to acquiesce, and when they did not respond, they were accused of being rapists, you know. I saw these things, and I was a kid. There was that kind of violence. This went on from a very early period until I went to college. When I went to college and went back there, I was determined I was going to find out more about the region through the library and the history. I'd heard that there were some slave altars there. My great-grandfather was from that region.

SMITH: Was he Creole?

LEWIS: Yes, but he was a very strange case in that he was keeper of the lodge, and he was an African Episcopal . . . what is it called?

SMITH: AME [African Methodist Episcopal]?

LEWIS: Yes, and of course being keeper of the lodge, and being a minister, he could read and write, but none of his children could read and write. That's strange, very



strange. In fact, my mother, who was his granddaughter, had to go to night school to learn to read and write, and she didn't do that until she was in New Orleans. That was very strange.

SMITH: Is that because white society didn't want it to happen?

LEWIS: Well, my great-grandfather was black Creole, and as minister he was the keeper of the books and everything, and he had these children. He didn't die until he was about a hundred and five, or something like that, and he was still very mean. I've got photographs and documents on all these folks, but I just couldn't understand it that he would not teach his children to read and write. I guess he just taught them to work, cut sugar cane.

Anyway, when I went back there I decided I wanted to go to the library and I wanted to look up these things. Somebody told me about Bunk Johnson, the musician, and there was some history on him, because he was from that same region. And someone else had told me that there was a ceramic altar somewhere in the swamps there that some African Americans had done, and so I set out to find out where these things were. So I went to the library and I wasn't supposed to go to the library because blacks were not allowed there.

SMITH: The New Orleans public library?

LEWIS: No, no this was in the Bayou Teche region, which was located between New Iberia and Jeanerette. It's a place that was called Olivier, which disappeared



when Jeanerette was expanded to include it. It was not permissible for me to go to the library in New Iberia, but I went anyway. My Aunt Laura said, "You know, that's causing problems, and people are going to do something to you," and I said, "Well then they'll just have to do something to me, because if I can't go to the library, if I can't do any of these things, then there's no point in living. Why should I bother?"

I met a woman who apparently was a Sunday painter. Her name was Ruth Roane. Her husband owned the sugar mill and a lot of the property around there, and we became friends. We became friends because I went to her house to find out where she purchased her art materials. I went to the front door, rang the doorbell, and her maid tried to send me to the back door, but I didn't go. I said, "No, I just want to ask this lady a question. Let her come to the door." Then she came to the door, and she invited me in, and we became very close friends.

She started taking me to the library. She would not let me ride the bus. This was a white woman, originally from Texas. She was a nurse, and she met Mr. Roane when he was a patient in the hospital where she worked. They married and she moved to Jeanerette, and she became a member of this very wealthy family that owned practically everything there. So people wouldn't dare do anything to me because they saw me as being associated with the Roanes. I could go anywhere, but not alone, generally, she would always go with me.

Because of her I was able to do some really good research in that region. I





found out a lot about symbolism and the religion, because most of the black people in the area believed in voodoo or hoodoo, and most of the white ones did also. If they didn't believe it they were afraid to say so, you know. There was a lot of religious activity in that area. You saw the portrait I made of my Aunt Laura; it's really an expression of her. I know she practiced hoodoo, and I think she was also one of the major persons in the religion. We talked about it and she was a little upset with me because I said I didn't believe in it. She said, "You will one day, you will."

My Aunt Laura worked for Mrs. Roane, so I didn't really just walk in off the street, I did have some connection with that family, but when I went back there as a college student, it was one of those fascinating experiences. I had probably learned more of what to look for and how not to get upset by things. I was able to talk to the Arcadians without seeing them as rednecks. I think I got more out of that region than any other place I've ever lived, in terms of spiritual kinds of things, and seeing how people lived. That's why Brazil was so important to me. I can go to Brazil and live with the poorest of the poor, but there is a richness that they have that I have been able to connect with, and they have been able to connect with me because of that.

I think in terms of my own work, my exploration in that area has been probably one of the richest experiences I've had. When I go back, I don't necessarily want to go to New Orleans as much as to the Bayou Teche region; that's more important to me than the city. The city has certain bits of excitement and experiences,



but it does not have for me the richness of the cultures that I found in Jeanerette and Olivier and New Iberia.

SMITH: This was a continuation of African traditions, largely?

LEWIS: Yes, yes. And I think it made me receptive to going to other places, like Surinam; I wanted to travel ... Brazil and Haiti. A lot of Haitian culture is found there, [in the Bayou Teche region]. I think that experience has been most important to me; it has to a large extent shaped my art-historical perspective and was responsible for my unrest when I began to take art history courses. Just being there and experiencing what I was able to experience in that region gave me a sense of excitement, a sense of real involvement. When I was doing European art history, and even American art history, which was very dull when I was coming along, it was as though you were always outside of it, you know, never really inside. But this you were a part of. Even though the history goes way back, you still could relate to it because there was something that was exciting enough to pull you into it.

I guess most people would say that sounds more like cultural history than art history, but what is art history if it isn't cultural history also? It helped to open a wider world for me. It's strange that you go into a small area and it helps to open a wide world for you. There were Native Americans there, Scottish people, peoples of African descent, the Arcadians, and then you had the Spanish, and I guess I was able to appreciate all of those cultures.





I don't know if you noticed the small painting in my kitchen of a boy holding a fish. That was my little Arcadian neighbor, and I'll never forget him. He would come over almost every day and talk to me about how awful "niggers" were—yeah . . . from his parents, you know. I said, "I'm not a nigger, I'm a Negro," and he says, "But I know you." I said, "But you don't know a lot of these white people. Do you have to know people to appreciate them?" So we sat and we talked for many, many days. I don't know what happened to him, but I think he probably had a different perspective after that.

When I first went there I would have barreled into him, you know, but I didn't do that when I was in college. I was beginning to be a teacher, shall we say. So I could appreciate the Cajun culture after a while, and they became more receptive to me. It's like speaking a language, you know, or trying to. They didn't know what to make of me. They knew that I was an African American and they weren't supposed to like me, but they did. It was a great experience. I know it's not the same now, but I still would like to go back and experience it again. I've been back since, but not to stay long enough; I'd like to spend a summer, we'll say. I love those oak trees and the moss and all of that, you know.

SMITH: Were you interested in the folklore? Did you have a sense that you needed to learn more about what people said about different things?

LEWIS: Yes, but not until I went to college. I went back and I spent a year on leave



from college, and I really was able to get a lot of information. I learned a lot about things that I thought I knew about already.

SMITH: Like what?

LEWIS: Well, I thought I knew about Haitian people, peoples of African descent . . . I thought I knew about the religion.

SMITH: You had read about these things.

LEWIS: Yes, of course. I knew about [Melville] Herskovits and what he had done, and so forth, but all of this I knew from books, and a lot of it had passed me over in New Orleans too, you see. I used to go to Algiers, and my folks would say, "Drop a dime in the Mississippi River and you'll have good luck." All that meant to me was throwing away my dime. [laughter] It didn't mean anything to me. Then I saw that people were basing their lives and their hopes and dreams and everything on the same kind of thing that I was pooh-poohing. It was really all they had to depend on, and these people, in spite of what was happening to them, were able to maintain their sanity and their sense of worth because of their beliefs. So I learned a lot.

And that's not all I learned. I used to tell one of my graduate students, "You come to my house and have dinner, and we'll have something from nothing." In other words, you could make a lot with a little. That's what I found there, too; you don't need a lot of things. I also found that I could use house paint to paint my pictures. I don't know if you saw the painting with the fellow reading; it's called *Southern*



*Exposé.*

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

LEWIS: That's Gliddens house paint on a board. Somebody was building a house and using wall board, and painting the walls with paint, and I just started painting using the wall boards. I did a lot of paintings that way. In New Orleans I would have tried to go to an art store, you know, but not there. I learned a lot. I learned how to live.

[Tape I, Side Two]

LEWIS: When Duke Ellington came to New Orleans, he stayed at my friend's house, the Edmunds, because he couldn't stay in a hotel. I saw him in his robe. I was having breakfast with them, and he got up to have breakfast; it was so wonderful. These were people that you could sit down with and talk to. Zora Neale Hurston came to Hampton [Institute] when I was working as a stage person. I would paint things and help set up the stage, so I got a chance to talk with her. [Richmond] Barthé knew Zora Neale quite well. He said, "People think Zora is crazy, but she has *plenty* of sense." Now, I had a scholarship to the state university of Iowa, but I passed it up for Hampton. I'm so glad I did that; Iowa would not have been the place for me, but Elizabeth [Catlett], my teacher, was trying to get me out of New Orleans. She also helped me to go to Hampton.

SMITH: Was your mother, or your family in general, what you would call race





conscious? Did they have a sense of obligation to the race in self-improvement?

LEWIS: Yes. My mother, when she was working as a domestic, worked for a German family. She took over and ran the family, of course, and she was always one who would never be subservient. She was serving dinner once and one of the men at the table said something about "niggers," and she wouldn't serve him. She refused. She had an obligation to stand up for the race, but she had her own way of doing it, and it was pretty feisty. You know, on the buses she knew that she had to sit in the rear, but she was not quiet about it. My mother was sort of an agitator, in a strange way. But she was not a racist, because the woman she worked with in the French Quarter was her buddy, and she was white.

I think one time I was so disturbed about something that happened, I said, "I think we ought to try and do without these white people. I can do without them, I don't know about you." And my mother says, "Well, I don't think we can do without each other." She gave me this lecture, and I thought she was being cruel, because I thought she should have said, "We *can* do without the white folks." But she didn't. I was very unhappy with her, but I think I learned something from that. She tried to tell me that that wasn't the way you do it. There were some good white folks, in spite of what I thought. And she named a few, you know, saying you have to pick and choose. And she also named some pretty offensive black folks.

You also have to realize that my mother's father was what you call a carpet-



bagger—he came from the north, and he was mixed. He had brown hair and light eyes; it was a very strange family situation. And I thought my father's father was Santa Claus; that's how he looked. That's the only way I can describe him. Of course the range of colors in both their families is all the way from dark to blond. So my mother couldn't say that all white people were bad, because she was a product of a half-white father. But she was a fighter, and she didn't stand for anybody calling anybody "nigger" and things of that sort. She belonged to the NAACP. She didn't have much money, but she did what she could do. She would go to her church meetings to further causes, and she couldn't get me in church enough because that wasn't my thing.

SMITH: What church were you raised in?

LEWIS: I was first raised in the Catholic church and everybody in my family who was a Catholic became a Methodist, because my mother's grandfather was a Methodist minister. When we were in Ponchatoula my mother was a Methodist, and when she went to New Orleans she became a Baptist, so I went to all of those churches. When I was with my uncle in New Orleans I used to go to Catholic church.

SMITH: Oh, I see, but you didn't go to Catholic school at all?

LEWIS: One year. Third grade, I think it was, something like that. I went to the Catholic school uptown, which was a black Catholic school. You know, there weren't any mixed Catholic schools. Even Catholic churches weren't mixed then.





You sat in the back of the white churches. You had a black church down in the Cabildo—downtown. I guess all of the churches were very segregated. I used to go across the Mississippi River to this Baptist church with Aunt Gladys, and that was quite an experience, too. It was one of those Baptist churches where people would get up and dance and jump around. I was a kid, and I thought they were going to fall on me. I couldn't quite settle down, and it was very unnerving for me. You know, they were falling out and getting happy, and things like that, so it was really quite something. Aunt Gladys's stepfather was the minister of this church, but I never was able to get too involved. The Methodist churches were too calm for me, and in the Baptist churches there was too much activity.

SMITH: It sounds then like your idea of spirituality has a different shape.

LEWIS: Yes, absolutely. I was more in tune with the bayou, Yoruba kind of religion. I guess having gone to Catholic school and knowing enough about Catholicism, the transfer to understanding and appreciating the *orishas* was quite simple for me. When I got married and we had two children, the priest came and wanted to know when we were going to get married. I was offended, you know. When I was in college at Hampton I would go to Catholic church every now and then. Then I went to visit some friends and the priest said to me, "I hope that they are devout Catholics that you are spending all this time with." And I said, "No, they are devout Protestants." He said, "There's no such thing." So all that kind of nonsense



really threw me off, and I decided that I couldn't spend my time believing in this kind of stuff—institutionalized racism and all of that. When I went to the eucharistic congress in New Orleans, the Pope came, and there was something about seeing him being carried on his throne that I couldn't adjust to, you know? I would leave New Orleans when they had the Carnival, because I didn't like this thing about the skeletons crawling on the walls of the cemetery, nor did I like King Rex and all of that kind of stuff. I guess if King Rex had been down there with me I would have appreciated him, but up there and doing all of this . . . the Pope was doing the same thing. I guess he was sprinkling his holy water. It was in Audubon Park, I remember it so vividly. It reminded me of the Carnival. So I said, "What am I doing here?" I would leave town when this happened.

SMITH: Was there talk about the civil rights movement, or race consciousness in your high school? I'm wondering what degree of accommodation and resistance was going on in black education as you were coming up?

LEWIS: In my high school the NAACP was very popular, of course, and we would go to cultural events, but there was not much emphasis on civil rights, if I remember correctly. It was something that was mostly in the streets, so to speak. And this principal that we had, Mr. Alexis, probably wouldn't have permitted it; he was such a right-wing kind of person. He was stern, and he wanted you to get an education, but he was absolutely right-wing. When I say that, I mean he would follow all the rules



that the white people would give him. Nobody would dare bring any books to school on civil rights. The closest I came to reading anything that might have spoken about civil rights was *Negro Art, Past and Present*, by Alain Locke, which my drafting teacher gave us. In that book Locke talked about how the Europeans had borrowed from the Africans and this, that, and the other, but that's as close as we came to it. I still have that little bronze pamphlet. I have the impression that the professor bought it for most of the people in the class, but maybe he didn't. He could have given it to me and a few other people.

I'm trying to think of any other books or any other exposure. We were exposed to civil rights activities in the streets, you know. There was a great situation down there on the waterfront, where there were union organizers, and some of the union people would meet in the Y. At Newcomb [College Art School] and at Tulane [University of New Orleans ] some of the professors were leaning towards the left, but in the high school, no, there was nothing. Andrew Young's father, an Episcopalian minister, and other church people probably did more in civil rights than the schools. Public schools did not; they were still controlled by whites, even though they were black public schools.

SMITH: And all the teachers were black?

LEWIS: All the teachers were black and could easily lose their job if they had dared infer that there was something wrong with what was happening.





SMITH: You had mentioned taking portrait lessons from a Mr. Galli down in the French Quarter. This was when you were younger, before you went to college?

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

SMITH: It doesn't sound like your mother had a lot of money, but nonetheless she was willing to pay for this?

LEWIS: No, he didn't charge me.

SMITH: Oh, really?

LEWIS: That was his way of combating discrimination. This was an interesting man. I never heard him speak one word of English, but I know that he was up to something. You know, he had this black "secretary." Rosa was her name. Warren and I would go down to the French Quarter every Thursday to look in the windows of shops and art studios, and our professor, because we finished our work quickly, would allow us to do this with the permission of our parents. Rosa noticed that we had been looking in this man's window for maybe six months or more, and one day she said, "Why don't you come in?" And because she was African American, we felt safe, so we went in. She showed us around and let us look at the paintings, and then asked us if we did any art work, and we said yes. She said, "Well, bring some of your work next week and let Mr. Galli see it." So we did. He called me "The Girl" and called Warren, "The Boy." He never asked our names. After he had looked at our work, he told us to come back and he would teach us. We said we didn't have any



paints or anything. He said, "Don't worry, come back." We went back, he supplied us with the paints and the brushes, and he taught us for two years. Nope, not one penny.

SMITH: And no explanation, just . . . that's nice.

LEWIS: I know, I know. I brought in my sister to be my model, and we posed for each other and we did all kinds of things. We did ask Rosa about Mr. Galli and she said, "Well, he's that kind of a person. He's a gambler, and he takes chances on people." That's all she said. It was incredible. So he supplied us with the materials and Rosa said, "He likes you." She was obviously his lady friend, which meant that he was trying to combat something, you know; he was doing his thing the way he wanted to do it. He taught us a lot of wonderful things, without speaking English, you know. He'd just show us how to do it and we'd do it. Then he did give us a lecture on the evils of modern art when we were getting ready to go to college.

SMITH: So he was conservative, artistically?

LEWIS: Yes, oh yes. And he told us how not to be seduced or duped by those people over at the college.

SMITH: What led you to decide to go to Dillard University first? Presumably you were going to go to Dillard and do your four years there?

LEWIS: Well, it was very interesting, because living in the bayou country, and living in the Ponchatoula, the only people who went to college were people who were ill,



sick, like those who had TB or something, so I was never really encouraged to go to college. My mother wanted me to do something, but she had no money to send me to college. I really wasn't going to college, but Mr. Spriggins, the drafting teacher, took me by the hand and said, "You're going to go here, to Dillard." He lived almost next door to Dillard. I said, "I don't want to go to Dillard." So he took me by the hand and took me there. I sat there and he got the papers for me to apply, and he got the papers for me to apply for funding. I went back and took the test, and I was hardly reading it. I was not that interested because, even though I had wonderful experiences in high school, there was something within me that said, "You really are not going to be able to do this because you don't have any money, and, anyway, maybe you shouldn't do this because only sick people go to college." I really wasn't saying that, but that was what I came out of.

SMITH: What did your mother say?

LEWIS: Oh, she was so happy. She was happy. My mother was making enough to feed us, but she wasn't making enough to send anybody to college. After Mr. Spriggins, who was a pretty important man in the black community, took me out to Dillard, they said, "We'll try her, we'll give her a chance." I took almost a year's course in the first semester and passed all of them with very good grades. They thought I was going to fail because when I took the test I didn't even read the questions; I just put marks, you know. I said, "I haven't had this. What are they





talking about?" Some questions were about psychology, and this and that and the other, so I just didn't pay much attention to any of it, because I knew that I wasn't going to be there for long anyway. I didn't have any money, and I wasn't sure I was going to get funding, so I didn't really try that hard. But I met with some wonderful, wonderful teachers who saw that I needed help, I guess. Elizabeth Catlett was there, of course, and then there was this man Benjamin Quarles, who was a Frederick Douglass expert; he left there and went to Morgan State [University]. His daughter is a TV personality. I had some great teachers at Dillard, wonderful teachers. Benjamin Quarles was my history teacher.

SMITH: Oh, he just passed away.

LEWIS: I was going to major in history, I wasn't going to major in art. Dillard of course didn't have a major in the first two years; it was general studies and humanities, so I was able to take courses with Benjamin Quarles and people like that. Elizabeth taught me art history, or art appreciation—that's what it really was. And there was a chemistry teacher there who was quite important. Dillard at that time had some great teachers.

SMITH: That sounds like an amazing faculty then.

LEWIS: Yes. They were all young out of graduate school, some with their Ph.D.'s and some with their masters; it was a good crowd. I was even interested in music, and the music teacher was Carol Blanton. I remember her. The drama teacher was



Randolph Edmunds, who taught us a lot about black drama. It was great. The only weak place was the art department. Elizabeth left the year before I did, and the art department was awful. The guy who replaced Elizabeth was a disc jockey in the nighttime and an art education person during the day. They used to call him "Dr Daddio." Elizabeth said, "I've got to get you out of there " [laughter] But the next semester I got a Delta Sigma Theta scholarship. I worked in the dean's office the first year and had a partial scholarship. When I transferred to Hampton I had a full scholarship, under Viktor Lowenfeld.

SMITH: Catlett was teaching at Hampton when you went there?

LEWIS: Yes. She left soon after I got there, because Charles completed a mural he was painting there at that time and they went back to New York. She was only teaching because he was there on a [Julius] Rosenwald [fellowship], so it was just a brief period that she taught me there.

SMITH: It sounds like she was at Dillard for a year, Hampton maybe for a term, and yet this is a friendship that's lasted through [fifty-eight] years.

LEWIS: All these years, yeah.

SMITH: So she was an important teacher for you.

LEWIS: Absolutely. I would say she was *the* most important teacher for me. Second to her was Lowenfeld, and then there was James [W.] Grimes, who was trying to understand me at Ohio State [University].



SMITH: Well, we'll get to Ohio State later.

LEWIS: I know, I know. Catlett was very important to me not only as a teacher but as a kind of role model. Somehow we were very close in New Orleans, and when Galli had me painting these portraits, she would say to me, "Do you know these people? Where is this person?" She would question me, querying me about the whole thing that I said I was doing. I'd say, "I don't really know who this is. I know the name of the person, but I don't know much about them." She said, "Well, have you tried to find out anything about them? Where is this place that you have put this person?" So she began to open my mind and my eyes to the whole figure-field relationship. You paint because you have an idea about something; you don't have to copy what you see, but you bring something of what you think into it.

So that's part of what she taught me. We'd go out and look at a tree, and it's like a tree's not just a tree, you know. And so we got into all of those things. She lived in the French Quarter at that time and she'd take me to her apartment there and expose me to books and music and Leadbelly and all of this. I didn't know anything about Leadbelly. I lived right there but I didn't know about Leadbelly. She just kind of adopted me. I knew she was involved in the unions, and I knew that they were going to get rid of her soon because she was active politically, and Dillard was still a conservative place. When she brought Paul Robeson there that was a no-no, but she brought him anyway.





SMITH: Did people know that she was a communist?

LEWIS: Well, she never was a card-carrying communist, but they knew she was left wing, and they would call her a communist. She did a lot of things that made it very clear where she stood. They knew that she was an activist, but they didn't know about communist leanings or anything like that, no. But there were quite a number of people at Tulane who were active; she wasn't alone down there.

SMITH: Was Tulane all white at the time?

LEWIS: Yes. And Newcomb was a women's college, but the faculty members were mostly males. It's interesting that the white women didn't seem to be very active at that time. It was mostly black women and black men and white men. It was very strange.

SMITH: In New Orleans?

LEWIS: In New Orleans, yeah.

SMITH: That is funny.

LEWIS: But I know that [Elizabeth] would get on the bus and she would throw the "colored patrons only" signs into the street, and do things to "antagonize the system." I had never met anybody like her before, who was as daring as she was, and who was overtly active.

SMITH: When you started at Dillard, and maybe this was actually just right before, Europe is at war, and Roosevelt is trying to mobilize the country. A. Philip Randolph



is planning his march on Washington, and the concept of the double victory is beginning to percolate, that if the nation wants Negro support it has to do better than had been done. Were you aware of this going on? Was this something that was important to you?

LEWIS: I knew about A. Philip Randolph. I think Elizabeth introduced me to most of this. It was associating with her that brought a lot of this to the forefront with me. As I said, I had never met anybody like her before, who was as active, and who insisted on being counted. She used to take me to meetings of the longshoremen, the union meetings and things like that, so that I would know about these things. As a result, when I was at Hampton, I became a shop steward for the union.

SMITH: She taught the art appreciation class, how did she approach the historical development of art?

LEWIS: I remember we used [Helen] Gardner's book [*Art Through the Ages*] back then. Elizabeth was a very good teacher. There was a great Picasso show at the [Isaac] Delgado Museum [of Art], which is what it was called then, and she took her class to see that show, even though we weren't supposed to be going into the park. I don't know if I've told you this story.

SMITH: No, you haven't.

LEWIS: Well, when I was a freshman she wanted us to see the Picasso show, because she was so fascinated by this whole thing. It was at the Delgado Museum.



which was in the park, and the city didn't allow Negroes in the park. We could go to the museum, but it was in the park. So Elizabeth devised a way to get us to the museum without having us in the park. She rented a bus, and the bus drove us right to the steps of the museum, and we stepped out of the bus onto the steps of the museum without walking in the park. We were in the park, but we didn't walk on the grounds of the park, so that was legal. But she personally had to rent the bus. That's what she did, because that's the kind of teacher she was; she wanted her students to see the Picasso show. None of us had ever been in a museum before, and that was quite an experience. Once we got into the museum we could go around and enjoy ourselves.

SMITH: You've got the Gardner text, you've got the museum, but how do you learn about [Henry Osawa] Tanner or [Meta Vaux Warrick] Fuller?

LEWIS: They had a Tanner in the museum and she told us about Tanner. But I learned about Tanner before, because he's in the book that my high school teacher gave me.

SMITH: Ah, the Alain Locke book.

LEWIS: The Alain Locke book, yes. I knew about a lot of them because I studied the book; it's right up there on the shelf.

SMITH: But that was the first time you could actually see a Tanner painting.

LEWIS: That's right, first time. After that I saw Tanners at Hampton, of course.





But that was the first time. They still have that painting at the New Orleans Museum; it's a great Tanner.

SMITH: What about people like Palmer [C.] Hayden, or Hale Woodruff, who were a little younger than Tanner but already well established in their careers by the time you were in school, but maybe not necessarily that widely known, I guess?

LEWIS: I knew about Hale, because Elizabeth and Hale were very close friends.

Dillard had shown works by a lot of these people before Hale set up his yearly Atlanta University series. Dillard and Tougaloo [College], I think, were instrumental in doing a lot of things. Elizabeth helped Hale to set up his yearly show, but prior to that, Dillard had a number of these artists in shows. So it was at that time that I began to meet or know about them. We would go up in the attic of the administration building at Dillard, because there were works up there by a lot of these artists.

SMITH: Now, Catlett of course had already been in Mexico, at the Taller de Gráfica Popular. Did she teach about Mexican art or Latin American art in her classes, or was this more one on one?

LEWIS: She didn't teach about Mexican art, but I'm trying to think . . . she went to Mexico in the forties. It was later.

SMITH: Okay. I thought she had been there even in the thirties.

LEWIS: If so it was a very brief period, but I think her grant was in the forties, because that piece behind you was from that period, the series on women, and that's



'46. She had been there before '46, but that was when she sort of stayed. I don't think she was there for any length of time before that. She taught about the Mexican muralists at Hampton.

SMITH: Because Hampton had a big mural series.

LEWIS: Right, right. She and Charles had been to Mexico before she came to Hampton. There was a period in-between when I think they left Dillard and probably went to Mexico, because the mural that Charles painted has a lot of Mexican influence in it, so I think that they probably did some work in between the two.

SMITH: At the time did you know Charles well?

LEWIS: Yes. Elizabeth brought him to Dillard to teach some drawing classes, so I took some drawing with him.

SMITH: What was he like as a teacher?

LEWIS: Probably at Otis [Art Institute of Los Angeles County] he might have been a better teacher, but he was just starting out at Dillard; he wasn't too effective, I think. He had a way of not getting excited about anything. He didn't exude any enthusiasm. He wasn't the teacher that she was, let's put it that way, and he didn't seem to have the energy that she had.

SMITH: Did you keep in touch with him after they divorced?

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

SMITH: So when you came out here, he was already out here, wasn't he?



LEWIS: Yes, and I think one of the problems that Charles had was he had lost a lung, and he wasn't as well. He lost it in the army, or something like that. I think that it had something to do with his military service. I'm not sure about that, but I do know that he wasn't always well.

SMITH: What I have gotten from people who took classes with him at Otis was that he wasn't terribly communicative, but you learn something from just looking at his art.

LEWIS: Right. Well, I had a problem with Charles. I have a book up there [Kimon] Nikolaïdes' *The Natural Way to Draw*, that Elizabeth gave me for Christmas. She tried to get Charles to sign it, and he wouldn't sign it. He had a selfish streak in him or something. I didn't really know him that well then, but she wanted him to sign it and he wouldn't, so she signed it and gave it to me. Charles and I never really hit it off too well. Even when he moved out here and I moved out here we didn't do too well.

[Tape II, Side One]

SMITH: What about Catlett's approach to technique, and quality? You talked about philosophy a little bit, but there are still technical questions. She has such control over every aspect of technique. Was she able to communicate that?

LEWIS: Yes, yes. Well, number one, she studied with Grant Wood. He was a painter, but she studied sculpture with him. He didn't know how to do sculpture, so he taught her carpentry.





SMITH: Okay, well that seems to match his paintings.

LEWIS: Yeah, and also works with today's sculpture, too. He taught her carpentry, and told her to do what she knew best, and so she figured she knew more about women. But in terms of technique she taught me about dematerialization, and how you break down surfaces so that they don't look like paint. They become either atmospheric or this, this and this. She's the one who introduced me to Cézanne. She taught me that even if you made three strokes that those strokes should be a complete composition, and there should be no other stroke there unless it was necessary. So she really taught me how to build up and how to work with drawings and paintings. But I think this whole idea of breaking down the surface so that it ceased to be paint is what was most important to me.

Also, Elizabeth liked abstractions very much, and she taught me that you approach drawings in particular as if you were an architect, and you work all over the surface, all over the area. Then you build it up. You don't make the head and then the hands and then this, then that. You construct so that you are talking about the total dimension and the width and the breadth of all of this. You work as though you are working on the foundation. So it was philosophy but it was also technique.

Elizabeth has the feeling that most students should go to school to learn technique, because nobody can teach you to be creative, but you can learn technique, and that's what she taught. I did my first silkscreens and etchings under her, and she was very



good. This whole idea of gradations, from dark to light, light to dark, and placement; it was almost like design—nothing should be directly in the center, you know, it should be off-center, if possible. I think she's the one who helped me to build that foundation, so when I went to Hampton, I could work.

SMITH: What about color theory? She's primarily a sculptor and a printmaker, but your work is very much playing with color.

LEWIS: She had me do color scales and all of that, you know, the really technical kinds of things. The whole class did old-fashioned color wheels and things like that.

SMITH: But you taught studio art?

LEWIS: I taught it at Florida A. & M. University and at Morgan State University, yes.

SMITH: And did you do more or less what you had learned from Catlett and Lowenfeld, or did you change things?

LEWIS: I assimilated certain approaches from them. I used an overall approach, but I worked individually in terms of students. I did not have one theory for everybody. By the time I taught studio I had studied Chinese art history and I had done work in Taiwan, so I knew about Chinese painting. I had been to a lot of artists' studios in New York. I guess I used more of what Lowenfeld did than what Elizabeth did, in that I worked from a perspective that I was going to sit down and talk with the student and work with the student, and see what technique the student needed at the



time.

I worked with Alison Saar. She was not well appreciated at Scripps [College, Claremont], believe it or not. They appreciate her now, because she's outstanding, in museums and galleries, but I really had to work with her, not only from an art-historical perspective, but from a creative perspective, to help her move into the direction where I thought she wanted to go. I had worked with Alison at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art [LACMA]. I was [Coordinator] of Education over at the county museum, and she was in the education program there, and I watched her develop from that time. Her main interest seemed to be something that had to do with folk tradition, and she really introduced her mother [Betye Saar] to that tradition. Her mother was doing things that had to do with the occult, but Alison introduced her to folk artists. That raw technique that [Alison] uses is not one that I know about; it's something that she got from an exposure to the people who *could* help her with that technique. So I started doing that kind of thing. Lowenfeld would never touch a student's work. He would always sit and talk to you about it, see where you were going in terms of your own kind of expression, and then expose you to works and ideas and situations that might help you to develop along those lines. I did more of that. So I turned out a few pretty good students.

SMITH: That's interesting, what you say about Lowenfeld, because much of the European studio teaching technique is the master takes the paintbrush and—





LEWIS: Like Galli used to do. He would show us. Lowenfeld never would, he would never touch our works.

SMITH: Now he was from Vienna, I understand.

LEWIS: Yes, yes.

SMITH: Also somewhat political?

LEWIS: Absolutely, yes. He was an advocate of doing anything he could do, even if there were only two people sitting there. You know, he wasn't looking for the crowd, he was just looking for a few people, and whatever was necessary, he would do. He was so kind and gentle, but absolutely on the course in terms of racism and so forth. He was at Harvard in the beginning; he didn't stay there. When he went to Penn State, I think he felt as though the people might have had too much there. You know, he told me, "I can give them something, but it wouldn't be what I want to give them, because they are interested in *things*." I used to go and spend some time with Lowenfeld and his wife when he was at Penn State. He was not happy there.

SMITH: But it paid more money?

LEWIS: He became too popular for Hampton and the administration forced him out.

SMITH: Really? What does "too popular" mean?

LEWIS: Well, people from New York came to see him, and then there were his books, and people were writing and calling, and his name was in the newspapers. He was in his heyday, you know.



SMITH: So Hampton liked to be anonymous?

LEWIS: Well, no, the administration felt that maybe he might have been taking time from his academic duties . . . I don't know why. In other words, the administration there did not like him after he became famous. I guess they felt that if he were famous then maybe he wouldn't be subservient to them or something. I don't know. But I do know that he was forced out. We went through a lot of things. He was responsible for my staying at Hampton to teach, because he said, "I want you to stay here because I don't think they'll do to you what they are trying to do to me." I stayed a year, something like that, but they forced him out.

SMITH: Did he have a more analytic approach, like, say, a Bauhaus approach to the art process?

LEWIS: No. He was friendly with the people in the Bauhaus, and he knew all the architects and people like that. Have you heard of Hoyt [Leon] Sherman's darkroom technique, where he would flash things on and you would get an image in your head, and you would draw?

SMITH: Oh, yeah.

LEWIS: Well, Lowenfeld preceded him, only he didn't do it with the darkroom technique, he did it with just moving the hand and the arm and the body. He would never let you draw with your hand, and he would never let you paint with your hand, you had to involve your body. So he really had an approach that said, "Okay, we're



going to influence you to create based on your experiences"—he was more [John] Dewey; you know, *Art as Experience*—"but you've got to get within your own body the ability to express these experiences." He wouldn't teach you to do anything unless you needed it. He didn't have any of those anatomy lessons. You only got that when you needed it, and you seemed to have a problem. He'd sit down and critique: "Now, what about this, and what about that in relation to this and that?" And you'd say, "Well, that's the way I want it." And he'd say, "Is that *really* the way you want it? Can you do it any other way? How do you feel about this?" He would let you become involved in critiquing your own work, but at the same time he was guiding you. He was an art educator, but he was also a psychologist.

SMITH: A trained psychologist?

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

SMITH: Was his interest Gestalt?

LEWIS: I think so, yeah. He worked with Freud.

SMITH: Did he talk about Freudian theory a lot?

LEWIS: No, no.

SMITH: Of course it was in the air at the time, you couldn't be in most places without running into Freud in one way or another.

LEWIS: Right, but he didn't talk about it. I was one of his unruly persons.

SMITH: Okay. What does that mean?





LEWIS: If he would tell me to do something I would do just the opposite. He had his theories about the visual and haptic, you know. And he told me I was visual and when he'd tell me that I'd go haptic. I could do either one. He would tell me, "You can't do it this way," so I'd do it that way. I wasn't going to ever let anybody tell me what to do, or when to do it, or how to do it. You can expose me to certain things, but you're not necessarily going to strongly influence what I do.

I didn't care about grades, you see; that was one thing I had that was to my advantage. When I was in elementary school they tried to make me draw milk posters. No, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't do anything that anybody had told me I had to do. My drafting teacher would say, "Okay, we're going to do this." Drafting is another whole thing, but that doesn't work with art. When I was doing something, Lowenfeld might say, "I think it's this way or that way," but unless I saw it, you know, I wouldn't follow his opinion. I would half close my eyes—that's another thing Elizabeth used to teach me. Don't look straight on, half close your eyes and do the shapes. But Lowenfeld would tell me it was more this than that, and because he would tell me that, I felt moved to show him I was going to do what I wanted to do. I'd just do the opposite. But we were very close friends after a while, because I think he learned that he wasn't going to make my art for me.

SMITH: Was he interested in abstraction as much as Catlett? Actually, Catlett describes herself as a realist, but then when you look at her work—



LEWIS: I have her on tape where she says she's really interested in abstractions, but she wants people to know what she's saying. She's political enough to want people to understand that she's doing political and social things. She would prefer to be an abstractionist, but she feels that ordinary people, the people that she would like to read into her art, would not be able to do that. But her foundation, you can see, is abstract. Lowenfeld liked people like Cézanne, he liked the Mexican muralists, and van Gogh. He never really expressed any preference for either figurative or abstract art. He just sort of let you do what you seemingly wanted to do, and then he would help you with that. But I never heard him express any preference for any style.

SMITH: Now, art historians claim that in the thirties the dominant school in the US was American Scene. You can call that realist, I suppose.

LEWIS: But Lowenfeld was more European, I think, in terms of realism. He liked Rouault and people like that. I could tell that he liked people like that. And Käthe Kollwitz, of course, he liked her. But I think he really liked [José Clemente] Orozco of all the muralists—I have that memory.

SMITH: When Catlett or Lowenfeld would talk to you about artists, was it primarily through books, or would they show slides in class?

LEWIS: Lowenfeld didn't show many slides, except if you needed to see the slides. He would talk to me about artists. Catlett showed more slides than Lowenfeld. She taught art appreciation, you see, and Lowenfeld really taught art education and art



theory and art in general. Helen Kendall, who also taught at Hampton, was an important artist in New York, though I didn't know at the time that she was important. She showed more slides.

SMITH: She was your printmaking teacher, right?

LEWIS: No, she taught color and design at Hampton. She used to go to Mexico every summer, or something like that, and she gave me some prints that she got a long, long time ago in Mexico. I still have them. But no, my printmaking teacher was Inge Hardison. She's in New York now.

SMITH: I wanted to talk to you a little bit about some of your own work. The earliest piece I've seen is *Home From the War*.

LEWIS: No, I have one I did when I was eight years old.

SMITH: Oh, really?

LEWIS: It's not that much, I have a slide of it. But it shows you some facility at the age of eight, you know. *Home From the War* is not as early as my portrait of Warren Kenner. You know the portrait of Warren Kenner? *Home From the War* is the big—

SMITH: Right, I know, that's part of the diptych. You did another piece.

LEWIS: Yes, you should have seen the other one. God, I don't know why they didn't include the other work in the exhibit. Possibly it was because the president wanted his piece admired. But, no, there was another painting, the one with the woman handing the boy the cup.





SMITH: Oh, okay, yes.

LEWIS: That's earlier than *Home From the War*, that was done under Elizabeth. That's when I began to extend the hand and do all those kinds of things.

SMITH: So you did *Home From the War*, but I don't know the title of the other large painting that makes up the diptych.

LEWIS: I don't really know it either, I'd have to look and see. But I have a photograph of it; that's one where the figure represents more of a Christ figure.

SMITH: Yeah. And you could say that *Home From the War* is a realist painting.

LEWIS: Yes, on plywood.

SMITH: Oh, oil on plywood.

LEWIS: Yes. When we were with Lowenfeld we didn't have any canvas, so he bought unbleached muslin for us. We made our own stretchers and used rabbit skin glue, we covered it with white paint of some sort, and then painted over it. The one with the sharecropper family is on muslin, it's not canvas. And the one of the boy carrying the water is not on canvas. They say, "oil on canvas," but— We made our oils from powdered pigment, and then we used tongue depressors and mixed in linseed oil, put them in jars with a little turp, and then put water over it to keep the scum from developing. We painted with that; that was our oil paint.

SMITH: So you made your own colors then.

LEWIS: Yes.



SMITH: That's impressive. That's a good thing to know.

LEWIS: We couldn't buy any supplies, and that's one thing I certainly learned early: if you wanted to paint, you could find supplies. I did a lot of encaustic paintings using a space heater and wax and powdered pigment; it was the paraffin wax that my mother used to use for preserving things, you know?

SMITH: Yeah. Now, was the subject for *Home From the War* something you had seen?

LEWIS: No, it was a commission for Camp Lee, Virginia. They wanted it for the chapel.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

LEWIS: And because I didn't make the central figure that they were adoring on the other panel white, the camp wouldn't accept it; they thought he was too much of a spiritual person to be black. They told me it was offensive to the white soldiers, but the white soldiers didn't go into the black chapel, so it boiled down to my saying, "I don't think they have enough spirituality for them to have it, so I don't want them to have it," and the commander of the base came to see the president of Hampton, and the president of Hampton told Lowenfeld to make me change it, and I wouldn't change it, so they ended up throwing it away, or something. After I left, [Joseph] Gilliard put it beneath his porch, and it stayed there for forty years.

SMITH: It's been recovered now.



LEWIS: Yes. And the other one looks really rich. I don't know why they didn't put it out, because it looks really rich.

SMITH: Is that the figure with the black Christ in it?

LEWIS: Yes. I have a photograph of it.

SMITH: So then you gave them *Home From the War* instead, or were you supposed to do two paintings?

LEWIS: I did two, and I was supposed to have done two. No, I didn't do it instead. No, that was two panels.

SMITH: So it was supposed to inspire the black soldier.

LEWIS: Yes. I don't know when I was first introduced to El Greco, but I did a big wall painting of Christ, in an El Greco style, rising, and he was black. That painting is in Florida. I understand that the minister who hired me to do this is just retiring. It's been a long time, but I probably did that in the fifties. I'd like to go down there and get a big four-by-five transparency of that, because it really is a beautiful painting. But I know I was absolutely influenced by El Greco; I just loved his work. Even though my work doesn't necessarily look like his, he was one of my favorites.

SMITH: For the time, in the early to mid-forties, that painting has really nice sculpted masses, and impasto in the colors gives a very nice feel to it.

LEWIS: Well, one of the things I was taught in terms of technique was that I was muddying my colors, and to avoid this Lowenfeld said juxtapose color next to color





Generally I used a palette knife for a lot of that, and I could just apply pure color next to pure color. Of course that's that Blue Rider stuff, you know. He didn't tell me what it was, but he told me that I could think about that.

SMITH: And later you found out where it was coming from.

LEWIS: Right, right. He used art history to help us go where he thought our tendencies were, and even though he was right about me, I rebelled anyway, just for the hell of it, you know.

SMITH: The next cluster of paintings I have seen, like *Waterboy*, were scenes from the Bayou Teche country: cane fields . . .

LEWIS: Right, all of those, and there was one you didn't see. Did I ever give you a catalog from New Orleans?

SMITH: Yes.

LEWIS: Okay, there was the one of the woman with the headdress?

SMITH: Oh, the *Obeah Woman*.

LEWIS: That's right. At Hampton they didn't exhibit any of the paintings dealing with spirituality and voodoo and hoodoo. They didn't put any of them out. I don't think they understood them, so they thought, "Well, this makes no sense," or something. I don't know why they didn't put them out.

SMITH: They had a couple of your Shango pieces.

LEWIS: Yes, but the really important ones they didn't put out. I had at least four



that should have been out there. Really powerful pieces. I have a letter in there from a priest from Ghana, who said that the *Obeah Woman* was one of the most powerful works that he has seen, and he wants it on the cover of his book. So that should have been out. I was a little disappointed that they didn't see fit to do that.

SMITH: What did you imagine yourself doing? Did you think that you would graduate and then become an artist?

LEWIS: No.

SMITH: Did you know you would be a teacher, then?

LEWIS: No, I didn't want to be a teacher. After I got past that first semester, I really had an eagerness and a desire to do things. I had been drawing since I was four years old; that I can remember. I don't know if I told you about my purple pig, but when I was in the first grade they would give you these ditto sheets that had a picture of a pig or a horse, and you were supposed to color them in. They still do it some places.

Well, my first-grade teacher passed those things out and gave me one, and I was never one to color in anything. When I went to Lowenfeld I found out I was doing the right thing of course by not coloring in and being restricted by somebody else's lines. So I redid what she gave me and paid no attention to the lines, and I made my pig purple. [laughter] I just did it my way, and I completely ignored what she had given me. She was so taken aback by it and she encouraged me and gave me five cents after class, because she thought that was very creative, so I found out then that



doing what you want to do not only gave you satisfaction but it sometimes paid off.

It's amazing how one little thing like that can set the course. I don't think that that's the only thing I look back on and seize, but the fact that I did it in first grade and there was some satisfaction, and some appreciation given to it encouraged me to hold on to the things I wanted to do and my beliefs, and I've held on all the way through.

In the fourth grade they tried to get me to draw milk posters and I wouldn't. I said, "I don't draw those things, I can't." And they tried to beat me down. They knew I could, so they kept me after school. My aunt had to come and get me. It was getting dark, and I was still there saying, "No, no, no," and they were saying, "Yes, yes, yes." I always used my art as an expression of something I wanted to do or I wanted to say. It was very important to me in the South to be able to do that; I was not going to be intimidated to the point where I couldn't express myself in some way. So that was my voice, that was my means of expressing myself, and I wasn't going to let anybody interfere with that.

I really used the schools as laboratories, or as places where I could enhance or better do what I wanted to do to express myself, because my art had become my voice. Even studying art history helped me to broaden that voice or to articulate it in a broader manner. When I sit down and read books I still think about how this is something that I can learn something from about what I want to do. And that's what





I did. I never thought about whether I'd get a job, or whether anybody would hire me. I never applied for a job. Julian Bond's father was at Fort Valley State [College] when I graduated from Hampton. He offered me a job and I didn't take it, because I decided that I had gone through so much with some of the teachers that I didn't want to be a teacher. I didn't know what I was going to do, but Lowenfeld talked to me, and he said, "I want you to come back and help me."

SMITH: So you taught at Hampton for a year?

LEWIS: I think it was two years, because I taught one year with him, and then a year after that. But he's the one who set me on that course, and said, "I want you to go to graduate school." And he told me where to go.

SMITH: Ohio State?

LEWIS: Yes. Sidney Schaeffet was the printmaking teacher there, but when I arrived there, he had gone to study in France in the atelier of a very famous printmaker. (Lowenfeld sent me to Ohio State to study printmaking so I could return to teach at Hampton.)

SMITH: Were you to get an MFA, or something equivalent to that?

LEWIS: Yes, and I did. I got an MA, I didn't get an MFA.

SMITH: But once you are at Ohio State, you decide to switch—

LEWIS: Oh, I switched all over the place. I had ninety hours more than I needed before I graduated. But all the while I was switching, I was taking art history



courses. That was very interesting. The art history teachers were really nice to me. I just didn't like American art, I thought it was very dull. One good thing about it was we would go to New York and visit the studios of some of the artists, people like [John] Sloan, and all those folks who were in the books. I took Renaissance art from Dr. [Ralph] Fanning, who was one of the great Renaissance scholars, and he was very good, I enjoyed it, but you know, "Enough is enough," I kept saying. I took Gothic art from him, and there were cathedral plans all over the place, you know. I just thought there must be something else. So I asked my adviser, "Isn't there something else? Isn't there more to the world than Europe?" Then he started sending me to the anthropology department. I think one year Susanne Langer came, and Ruth Benedict came. So it moved on out into a lot of departments. But we'll get into that, as you said.

SMITH: I am curious whether you had a conception of creative process as being something different from art?

LEWIS: I guess I would have been some good in Africa, or places where they don't have any terms for what they call art. I think the creative process would be more of what I would be inclined to appreciate. I think "art" is a term where you classify people according to your standards rather than their standards. I happen to believe that a people in a culture determine what their art is, or what is art for them. I think the Europeans do it for themselves, and it breaks down into the Italians and the



French and the this and the this. I just don't think that there's an overall category that allows you to say, "This is art and this is not." I think it's the creative process that I'm more inclined to appreciate.





SESSION TWO: 19 MAY, 1997

[Tape III, Side One]

SMITH: First off, I wanted to ask you if you had any further thoughts from yesterday, anything you wanted to add or comment on further, or amend?

LEWIS: Well, I said where and when I was born, but I wanted to let you know that some things about my early life are recorded in Ponchatoula because that's where I started out in school, and my father had me registered as being from Ponchatoula, because he's from Ponchatoula, but my birth took place in Charity Hospital in New Orleans, where my mother later had a hysterectomy. I was the only one born in a hospital.

SMITH: Of the whole family?

LEWIS: Of the whole family. And that's because she was sick. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been born in the hospital.

SMITH: Did you go to the doctor as a child?

LEWIS: I always went back to the hospital as a child, and I think that's what plagued my father and made him send me on to his brother and his brother's wife. I was always claiming to be sick—"claiming" because I didn't want to stay with my father. That was a really peculiar family to live with. My father was not poor. His father had five sons and gave each of them a lot of land. I don't know how his father got the land, but they owned half of the area of Ponchatoula. My father had a big farm and



he didn't have to work himself.

SMITH: Did he help your mother support you?

LEWIS: Once I left, no, he didn't. I maintained contact with my father until he died, but it was a very difficult relationship. My half brother and I, the one who is in San Francisco, always talk about those days when I guess I was the only one who befriended him in that whole family. His mother died and he went to live with his father. But it was a very strange family, the Sanders. Five boys and two or three girls, and the girls got nothing. They didn't get any land, they didn't get any attention. The brothers were not very close, even though they lived next door to each other, on adjacent land. My grandfather apparently was very Caucasian looking, with blond hair, blue eyes, and his wife was very African looking. I never saw her, she died before I was born, but I saw him. Not a great deal, because he was very strange to me. As I said [off-tape], I was always afraid of Santa Claus, and he looked like Santa Claus.

SMITH: Yeah, you said that.

LEWIS: So that's an interesting part of my family. I know something about them, but we were not close.

SMITH: Did you remain in contact with your uncle that you lived with?

LEWIS: Until he died, yes. In the inheritance, when they portioned off the land, they gave him what amounted to a stream or brook. Instead of land they gave him what



they call a ditch, because he wasn't there to look out for himself. That's the kind of family it was. My father was able to buy a car every year, I remember that. He was not rich but he was not poor.

SMITH: Did he hire people to do work?

LEWIS: He hired people to pick strawberries; he had a big strawberry farm. That land is still in the family. He didn't believe in education either, and that's why I was always sick. I didn't necessarily know what a real education was, but I wanted more than being on a strawberry farm. I was smart enough to know that even as a little kid, you know? I did everything I could do to antagonize him so he would send me away, because I knew if I asked to be sent away he wouldn't do it. It was really quite something. Every time one of us comes up and we do something mean, we say, "Well, that's the Sanders in you."

SMITH: Oh, really? [laughter]

LEWIS: My mother never talked against him, but it was quite evident that this was a family with a mean streak in it. You were not supposed to help each other, or work with each other and cooperate.

SMITH: So when she left she was on her own, basically?

LEWIS: Oh, absolutely. She was alone almost when she was there, because she had to do a lot of sewing and she was trying to take care of us, and she was ten or fifteen years younger than my father. I think it was one of those marriages where she wanted





to get away from home, too. She just probably married the wrong person. That's why I haven't talked too much about my father, because there isn't too much I could say except that he had a chance to go to school, he learned to count money, and that was the most important thing to him.

SMITH: Well, it's a skill we all need to know.

LEWIS: I know. [laughter] I didn't dislike him, but I didn't know much about him. He was very kind to me, don't misunderstand; he was not a brutal man. I never saw him drink. The only thing I saw him do was to smoke a cigar, or something like that.

SMITH: As you were growing up, you lived in New Orleans. Would you go back to Ponchatoula?

LEWIS: I'd go in the summertime, yes. I also used to go to Lake Pontchartrain to live with a really interesting couple. Her name was Cindy and his name Buck. They lived in this bayou area around Lake Pontchartrain, and it really was very deep around there, so deep that you couldn't fish; you had to get in a boat and go upstream to fish. Everything was in the water, on piles and everything. Buck and Cindy couldn't swim, I couldn't swim. We were living in the water and none of us could swim! Buck and Cindy drank quite a lot, especially on Saturday nights. They'd have their Saturday night brawl. I was a little kid, and I wanted to live on the water; I wanted to do all these crazy things. This was a couple my father and mother knew, and so I would go to those places in the summer, either with Buck and Cindy or with my father on the



farm.

SMITH: In Ponchatoula, were there spiritual lessons that paralleled those you learned about in the Bayou Teche region?

LEWIS: No, in Ponchatoula there was an African Methodist Episcopal church that most of my family there attended. It was called Taskers Chapel. I don't know what that means. I remember the minister. So I participated more in that kind of thing. I remember there was a big Holiness community, and I used to sneak off and see those people dance, and it seemed like they were having a grand time. That sort of religion was quite prevalent, but there was none of the spirituality that you found in the Bayou Teche region, no—none of the interest in African religions except the Holiness, which was a different kind of thing. There was no Obeah woman, none of this. The waterways there were small, it was a heavily Indian area, and the bayous and the moss trees didn't dominate as they did in the Bayou Teche.

Part of the mystique and the mystery of the Bayou Teche has to do with the environment. Ponchatoula was a different kind of environment. This was where they had quarters, they had timber mills, and a lot of pine trees, I remember that. What I remember most is the pine trees that I used to climb, and I'd play ball in the open areas where they had cut the pines down. And there were strawberries in Ponchatoula. The bayou area had sugar cane rather than strawberries. Ponchatoula had small patches of sugar cane, but the dominant crop was strawberries.



SMITH: Sugar cane is a very exploitative industry, with a lot of conflict in its history and its an ongoing conflict.

LEWIS: Absolutely, yeah, it is. Also, in that bayou area, were the salt mines—in Avery Island, I think it's called, near New Iberia. So there was a whole different kind of situation. There wasn't a sharecropper system in either of these areas. You worked for somebody, and you might own a little crop of land . . . I guess more people owned their land in Ponchatoula than in New Iberia.

SMITH: You mentioned the African religion in the Bayou Teche area. Do people think of it as *African* religion?

LEWIS: No, no, they think of it as hoodoo. They don't mention it as a religion as such, it's a practice, it's a way of life, and it's a belief. It's an everyday thing. It's like being Jewish. Which makes it even stronger, because it has to do with the foods, it has to do with a lot of things, you know. Of course they tell you what to eat and drink to accomplish this, that, or the other. So it has to do with a lot of things. They don't know about Africa as Africa, but they look like Africans. My Aunt Laura . . . I never saw her hair. I lived with her for a whole year. She smoked a pipe, like the spiritual women in Brazil. She had mysterious-looking eyes, like the women in Brazil, and when I say "mysterious-looking" eyes, I mean she had heavy lids, and she looked at you piercingly. When she died, I realized she had very long hair that I didn't know about. She had it cropped under the head tie. I guess it wasn't the thing to do, to





show your hair; it was part of the practice and part of the belief system. You communicated more with your head ties than with your voice. She looked very Haitian. She wore blue denim and an apron most of the time, and the head tie. I never saw her in anything else.

SMITH: Now, a lot of this you were trying to express in your art, maybe without thinking it through quite so articulately as you did later. Maybe you could talk a little bit about this as we look at some of the pictures. They won't be illustrated in the transcript, but it might help in terms of the way your thinking about art developed as you tried to work through how to express what you were feeling about this country and these people. I mean, how do you express the spiritual aspect of this?

LEWIS: Well, there are some symbols that you might begin with, like six fingers and the third eye, and all of those things. I knew about those symbols, but where I learned about them, I really don't know exactly. Lowenfeld did a lot to help me approach my art from a point of view where I was working from experience. I would seldom make drawings for paintings. My drawings were always for drawings. There are times when I worked on drawings and I couldn't get out the theme or the idea; I would do one drawing after the other of the same idea or a similar idea. But I never would just make a drawing and transfer it to painting. Generally, I feel that you have a limited number of ideas anyway that are really going to confront you, stimulate you, and motivate you to work.



My canvases are always blank when I put them before me. Even more so then than now, I would wait, I guess like [André] Malraux, for the silent voices. It sounds really weird, but I would wait until I saw, in a fleeting glance, generally, what I wanted to do and how I wanted to begin. The images came forth out of my mind, but it's almost as though I could see them, and I could put them down very quickly. Some of my most important works were painted in twenty minutes but thought about in six hours, or six months, whatever. It became clear to me: "This is what I want to do." The work doesn't grow from putting one shape next to another shape as much as from images that seem to emerge out of belief systems I didn't even know that I held.

I have experienced a number of things that even I have been surprised about and shocked by. Even before I went to Hampton some things happened that probably grew out of that experience of going back and forth to the bayou country. I used to go on Perdido Street in New Orleans a lot; that used to be the street of the conjure women. And going across the river . . . I probably picked up a lot of information and a few approaches to understanding even then, you know, early in my life, without knowing it.

Somebody asked me, "Do you practice that voodoo and hoodoo?" I said, "No, you don't have to practice it; it's like you practice Christianity or Catholicism or Protestantism." If you live with the concept, then you are practicing it all the time; it's



a way of life for you and you understand it. It's like dealing with alternative medicines. You have a belief system, and you believe that that can do more for you than the people at Kaiser. So it works sometimes, and something happens that maybe a doctor would say is a miracle; he's shocked by what happens, but you're not, because you have followed a certain system that tells you, "This is going to be more purifying than what the doctor's given you." The doctor's given you chemicals. So you rationalize, and you come out with something that some people will call a miracle.

Somewhere along the line I have picked up a lot of some basic qualities of African religions, and somewhere in my perusal of different cultures, I have assimilated and been able to put some of this together for myself as a way of thinking. I know it has influenced what I've done and what I've tried to do; it certainly has influenced my art. I have not separated it from the daily life that I have experienced as a US citizen. I've woven this through, and I've probably been able to strengthen not only my personality but my place by being the person that I think I really am, within, almost, a foreign environment.

SMITH: Right, maybe foreign, definitely hostile.

LEWIS: Yes, right, absolutely. I'm not asking anybody else to believe what I believe, but it's given me enough courage and stamina in my understanding of who I am and what I want to do, that I have been ready to give up things like a Ph.D., and this, that,





and the other, if I had to conform fully to somebody else's belief. I will open my mind to a point, if what they are helping me do contributes to what I want to do, but if it takes me away from who I think I am and what I want to do, then I don't care about any of it—the bachelor's, the master's, or the Ph.D. I've felt that way at every stage.

I had a confrontation with Lowenfeld when I was at Hampton. He put me in an art course, and I realized after about a month that it was not the thing for me. I thought that the teacher was good, but she was going to be detrimental to me. I didn't tell Lowenfeld why, but I said, "I am not going to continue in this course. I have my reasons and they are very good reasons, and I will take a failing grade now if I cannot withdraw." I knew that that would destroy me for the whole semester. I was never a person who minded getting C's or D's. I made a D in home economics at Dillard, and I made a C in art education at Hampton, because I didn't like it. I preferred weekends with Lowenfeld, listening to his guitar, and talking about art.

SMITH: Again, a practice.

LEWIS: So I always said that I probably gained my degrees by people wanting to get rid of me. [laughter]

SMITH: I'm sure there's more to it than that. You mentioned yesterday, as I was going out the door, that you had more experiences at Hampton that you did feel were important. You mentioned the museum visits with Lowenfeld.

LEWIS: Well, I think Lowenfeld as a person was very important. He was a



professor that you could laugh with and you could get angry at and say, "I'm not going to talk to you for another couple of weeks." He was that kind of a person. He was dealing with some difficult students. If Lowenfeld had a class of thirty students, he probably would pay attention to fifteen of them, and those fifteen would be the ones who gave him some difficulty, who had ideas of their own. I must say, he didn't pay too much attention to ordinary students, students who didn't have ideas of their own. I don't know if that's common or what, but he spent most of his time dealing with the complex student.

Maybe he was learning also, because he was writing his book *Creative and Mental Growth* at that time, and I guess in creative and mental growth you deal somewhat with problem people, you know? I think he probably felt that if the students were not aggressive enough to have ideas of their own, then they were not going to give forth very much, and he would just teach them like he would ordinary students. He didn't spend too much time trying to stimulate them. He didn't have to stimulate us, we were already overstimulated. We would attack him and everything else.

SMITH: Did he take everybody to the museums, or just this smaller group?

LEWIS: He took everybody to the museum, but he focused on about fifteen of us, or fewer than that. We were the ones that he paid attention to. Some of the other students recognized that and really almost hated him for it.



SMITH: You mentioned yesterday that he didn't teach you something until he felt you needed it.

LEWIS: That's right.

SMITH: So what did he feel that you needed?

LEWIS: Well, he felt that I needed to know about van Gogh, impressionism, expressionism. . . . he felt that I needed to know something about color relationships, like the juxtaposition of colors. But he didn't do that until I started muddying color. He also taught me about people like [Chaim] Soutine. He saw I was elongating things, and I would be getting confused, and he said, "Well now, this is the way this person solved that problem." He led me more in the direction of expressionism than anything else. I think he felt there was something that I was trying to do, and that I had no background in doing it. He helped me along by showing me slides. I think he showed us more reproductions than slides, if I remember correctly. We didn't have too many slides at Hampton at that time.

He started us out being professional early. That sculpture I did of the woman bending over with the book, trying to learn to read, was purchased by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts from a show that Hampton had there when I was a student. Lowenfeld had us in shows in New York. He was a good friend of Victor D'Amico's and he had our student work in an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art; Hampton was the only college to have a show there. Lowenfeld had a lot of pull.





SMITH: So this was him, it wasn't a Hampton tradition?

LEWIS: It was Lowenfeld. There wasn't an art department before Lowenfeld at Hampton. And after Lowenfeld there certainly wasn't this continuation of a Hampton presence in major museums and in important places. It was Lowenfeld. And that's one of the things that got him into difficulty with the administration. They didn't like the fact that he was important out there in the world, and I guess they were not. The administration seldom is; they didn't know that.

SMITH: But you would think his being important would make them important.

LEWIS: I can see you've never worked in a black college.

SMITH: No. [laughter]

LEWIS: No, that's not the way it is. The administration is very difficult, generally. I'm sure it must have changed by now. Well, it hasn't changed too much. The administration at Howard University is closing down the art department. They're probably the second most important art department in terms of black colleges in the country, and they're shutting it down instead of building it up. That's nonsense; it makes no sense at all. They are important in terms of their collections, and they could really bring credit to the university, but they don't see it. Imagine Lowenfeld in an art department that's new, gaining more popularity and a greater presence than some of the other areas that the administration might be interested in. That's not good. He was like a new kid on the block, you know, and in most places they wouldn't accept



that.

SMITH: You showed me one of your first sculptures.

LEWIS: I showed you the first one I did when I was at Dillard with Elizabeth, in 1941. It's a little cherub. I had never done any sculpture. I probably did some soap sculpture in junior high school, but I had never done any sculpture with clay. This was the second one. I moved into a better understanding there. You can't see it too well. I really had a great feel for sculpture, I think. This must be an early one, also.

SMITH: That's nice. You said yesterday that you took a sculpture class from William [E.] Artis. What was he like as a teacher?

LEWIS: Oh, he was really nice. He was an appointment from the Harmon Foundation. He had won the Harmon Foundation first prize in sculpture. Along with what little money they gave him, he was sent to different black colleges to teach. He was at Hampton for that semester, and he was very, very good. I stayed in touch with him. When I was teaching at Scripps, I invited him to show some of his works in the gallery there. We were in touch on and off, we would see each other at meetings. Then I found out he was in Minnesota, or wherever he was the last stage of his life. He was a great teacher. He taught sculpture and ceramics, but mostly sculpture.

SMITH: Did he talk about the Harlem Renaissance?

LEWIS: He didn't talk about the Harlem Renaissance. He was very young, at the tail end of it. Elizabeth talked more about the Harlem Renaissance than any of the others,



because she was a child of the Harlem Renaissance. She worked during the WPA, but she knew a lot of the Harlem Renaissance people, like Spanky [Charles] Alston, and she knew Hale Woodruff really well. So she was able to talk about it, not necessarily as a part of her art appreciation class. Elizabeth had an interesting background in that she studied with [H. W.] Janson at [the University of] Iowa. Apparently Janson helped her a great deal at Iowa, because the people there didn't want to accept her credits from Howard. Janson worked with her and helped her to get through that. I don't think he had written his book at that point, I'm sure he hadn't, but Gardner had, and Elizabeth went strictly to Gardner when she was doing the art appreciation.

It was only in her conversations in her art classes, when she taught painting or sculpture or drawing, that she talked about the Harlem Renaissance people, and she also brought some of them to campus. Then I realized that Dillard had a tradition that reached back to the Harlem Renaissance. I hadn't known that. A lot of people still don't know that Dillard had some of the first Harlem Renaissance exhibits. Hale Woodruff later began pulling them together. That piece I have in there, *The Angry Christ* by [Richmond] Barthé, won first or second prize in one of the shows that Hale Woodruff had in Atlanta. Elizabeth was a good friend of Hale Woodruff's. She was a little younger than some of the Harlem Renaissance people, but she did know Langston Hughes and all of those folks. She taught with Langston Hughes. When





she left Hampton she went back to New York and she taught at an alternative school where Langston Hughes also taught.

SMITH: How did you get to know Richmond Barthé?

LEWIS: He was born in Bay St. Louis [Mississippi], but when he was a teenager he moved to New Orleans, and he started working for some people there. He became very active in New Orleans at Xavier, with a professor there. After that he went to the Art Institute of Chicago, but I knew his name only, and I didn't really meet him until he came to Altadena. I think, he'd left New Orleans in 1925, but I had heard about him when I was in senior high school. People at Xavier University talked about him and he was revered there as one of the great sculptors.

I saw his *Negro Looks Ahead* on the cover of a book, and I saw it reproduced in a number of other places and I always wanted a copy of that. So when I heard he was in Altadena I went to see him and to see about buying that piece. He had never had any edition, or anything cast, so he had one cast for me and one for Eunice Johnson, from *Ebony* magazine. We went together to see if we could buy some of his work, and that's when I began purchasing his work. Then I met Ivan Dixon, who was a director for James Garner. He was also a successful black actor. He was in *Hogan's Heroes* or something like that, and he did *Nothing But a Man* with Abbey Lincoln. He now lives in Hawaii. He lost face in Hollywood because he wouldn't do what the people wanted him to do, and he moved to Hawaii. I don't know whether it



was before or after I bought this piece, but Ivan said, "You know, we've got this very important artist in Pasadena who's just about starving. He will not take any welfare or anything of that sort, and he's got patches on his clothes."

[Tape III, Side Two]

LEWIS: Knowing Barthé has been one of the high points in my life.

SMITH: You've been working on a book on him.

LEWIS: Yes. I taped him for almost ten years, just to see if he would say something different; he had a pattern that he used. But it took me five years to find out about Fallingwater and the fact that the Kaufmanns [Edgar J. and Liliane S.] had some of his work. I found out because I saw a magazine with his work in it, and I asked him about it. He said, "Oh, yes, I was a good friend of the Kaufmanns and Frank Lloyd Wright." I said, "What?" It didn't mean anything to him, because he was more interested in doing his work. So he was one of the high points in my life. I guess on the whole . . . I don't know. I shouldn't say what I wanted to say.

SMITH: Oh, no, go ahead. Anything you say can be cut—

LEWIS: I know. No, I'm just saying that the people I've enjoyed most are people that most people don't seem to care about. I've learned more from ordinary people than I have from scholars. I've learned more from the people in the bayou country, people in Brazil, people in Haiti, the so-called poor people. But these people are rich in culture; they will look at you strangely at first, but they then realize that you are



one of them. It's that kind of rich experience that I think has been the best education for me.

That's why, to some extent, I resent scholars who go into places and stay a couple of weeks and come back and become authorities on the cultures that they visited. If they can take something into those cultures that they can build on, I can understand it, but to go and supposedly assimilate an entire culture without having any kind of direct experience, bothers me. That bothers me about education. I have listened to people giving lectures over at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and even at the Getty, on things that they really know nothing about. They have not had any kind of in-depth experience. It's superficial things where they have taken mostly what they already believed to the countries or the cultures, and integrated a little of what seems to be in those areas. I haven't given up on education, but—

SMITH: Do you mean things like Freudian theory or semiotic theory?

LEWIS: Yes, I do. We also seem to place our own labels on things that do not fit in certain cultures. We don't even recognize many places as having cultures. I remember in anthropology they used to call them subcultures. I don't know why I take those things so seriously. A lot of people would say, "Well, it's just the way it is," but I can't. That's why I started writing, because I could not have my students only exposed to those books. That's why I went to the president of Scripps College and said, "I'm not going to do this anymore." I meant I wasn't going to torture myself





anymore.

SMITH: You mean when you retired from Scripps?

LEWIS: Yes, yes. I didn't have to retire. I could have been there for another ten, fifteen years, but I didn't want to torture myself, because I did take seriously what was happening around me. Even in my department the people would not recognize other people as being worthy of any kind of consideration. They still don't; it's still that way. So I have to create my own world, with a few friends.

SMITH: There has to be that provocation, right? Things don't change by themselves.

LEWIS: No, I know. I realize that, and I'm going to keep trying. Not that I'm right and they're wrong. Don't misunderstand me, it's just that if I'm going to grow and develop I have to grow and develop in an environment where there's some support.

SMITH: What about the student community at Hampton? As I look at the names, John Biggers, I guess, was a student while you were there. He's the biggest name, but you also had John Bean and Marcellus Portilla and Junius Redwood, and—

LEWIS: Persis Jennings.

SMITH: Yeah. A lot of talented people there. Did you form a community?

LEWIS: Yes, we did, we really did. We formed a community and we did things other than things related to school. We would go places, and we would get together and go over to Daddy Grace's Temple.

SMITH: Oh, I don't know about him.



LEWIS: You don't know Daddy Grace? He had long fingernails and he was one of the prophets of the period. He was a Father Divine kind of figure but he decorated himself to the point where he had these long robes and long fingernails that curved, and long hair, almost jericurl looking, but natural curls. He was the one who started bringing saxophones and bands into the church, and instead of getting happy and falling out in the seats, you could get out there and dance. And he had big washtubs for you to throw your money in. [laughter] That was over in Norfolk. So we would go to places like that and dance, and have a good time. We would also go to Virginia Beach and do things. We would critique each other's works, and we just had a little group. Some of us would meet in New York, and there was a ferry that went to Philadelphia or someplace, I don't know where. But we did things together. Biggers was in the Navy part of the time; he wasn't in school all of the time. I think the first year he was, but in the second year he was drafted and had to go into the Navy. But he was in a naval training school on campus.

SMITH: So he was still around?

LEWIS: Yes, yes. He painted murals for the captain and did all those things. Lowenfeld worked with him. Biggers and I did two books for the Navy. I spent a summer doing a book called *You Too Can Read*, or something of that sort. And Biggers did work on that. I made illustrations for Lowenfeld's writing. I have a copy of it.



SMITH: Oh, that sounds interesting.

LEWIS: We used an acid process where you would draw in acid on a special plate, and then they would develop that and then print it on an offset machine. A lot of sailors couldn't read and write in World War II, so we made books for them to learn to read. I'd be happy to show you what I have.

SMITH: The two big paintings, *Home From the War* and the figure with the black Christ, *Everyday Christ*, are very much in a muralistic framework, and of course the WPA is over, but that kind of aesthetic is just about to peter out. Why didn't you continue doing muralistic kind of work? It seems to me your work gets a lot more abstract. Still representational, but you get away from the kinds of representational strategies that you would see in WPA work or in Biggers's work or in Charles White's work or in Catlett's work.

LEWIS: That's because I went to Ohio State, and Ohio State was glorifying Picasso and Braque and Lipschitz and folks like that. I guess the closest they came to figurative work was Ben Shahn. They brought him to campus and I had the privilege of a one on one with Ben Shahn, which was marvelous. But it was the influence of Ohio State and the art department there and what was happening. They were into darkroom techniques and they were into more abstract kinds of stylized forms and things. It influenced me to a certain extent because it was something I liked, but I had to fight to continue what I was doing at Hampton, because it was looked upon as





being propaganda.

SMITH: Too much message?

LEWIS: Yes. I was told that I should forget about myself, and deal with form and color and the concept of design.

SMITH: Is this Grimes who's telling you this?

LEWIS: It was all of those teachers there. Grimes saw that he couldn't quite force me to do that. I didn't get to Grimes until later on. Grimes was my last stop at Ohio State. I went through quite a few people before Grimes. That's why I just had to get away from them. He was one of the ones who helped me to try to move back into what my thinking was. He was trying to understand me, and the rest of them were not, they were just seeing me as a propagandist and militant. It was so funny, because I was in an aesthetics class with Roy Lichtenstein, and I guess he was taking old masters and reconstructing them, and so forth, and they looked upon him as the person most likely to fail. [laughter] So I wasn't the only one that they picked on. Roy had to go through it, and they just laughed at him, and carried on and tried to make him feel inferior in everything. So we hooked up and became friends because the two of us felt like we were the two most abused individuals. And now look at how they look at him. But it wasn't that way then.

SMITH: He's their most successful product. [laughter]

LEWIS: Right, absolutely, absolutely. But that was the struggle at Ohio State. how



do you maintain some sense of self and get through these people?

SMITH: At the same time, from what you've been saying, you also must have felt this tension, because if you wanted to continue doing the WPA or the muralistic, you would have, so you must have felt this abstraction served your vision in some way.

LEWIS: Yes, I think I did; at least I was being open minded, with the hope that it would strengthen what I was doing. I wasn't completely satisfied with the figurative work that I was doing at Hampton. I was satisfied that it was something I wanted to do, but not to leave it at that stage. I wanted to move it forward so that it would be stronger, and I guess my work in sculpture helped me to feel that that's what I wanted to do. I think Ohio State helped me—

SMITH: To do *Field*?

LEWIS: To do *Field*, yeah. I wouldn't have done that at Hampton. [At Ohio] they moved me from the light/shadow concept into a more simplified form concept. I accepted a lot of what they said, but I rejected a lot also. I had a theory that if you learned fifty different ideas then you maybe maintain five or ten of them. You can't keep all of it. But no, I don't think I could have done this piece coming out of Hampton. And I liked that.

SMITH: It's very powerful, it's graphic, and the message is not ambiguous.

LEWIS: No. So at each one of these places I found somebody who was willing to sit down and work with me and talk with me and try to convince me that maybe they had



something to say that I should listen to.

SMITH: At Hampton many of the students were doing murals, and that's what they wanted to do, but part of Biggers's style at that time was elongation, and you and other students were interested in that as well, and there was this sort of development of a collective style.

LEWIS: You know, until I went to Hampton this last time, I had never seen the piece they had there by Lowenfeld that was so much like what Biggers was doing. It was very clear to me that [Lowenfeld] was really teaching us, in a way, what he was doing. The only other piece I saw was a large painting, which wasn't like that. I was just shocked when I saw that particular work, because it was so much like what Biggers was doing. Since I carried with me Galli and Elizabeth Catlett, I was doing something other than that. My work had a little more of something else in it, but what Biggers was doing was pure Lowenfeld.

SMITH: It wouldn't have been a little bit of the other way around?

LEWIS: Possibly, but I don't think so. Lowenfeld didn't do much painting when he was at Hampton, but I think he guided Biggers. I think he guided him in terms of his form concept, and I don't think it was the other way around. We used to say that Lowenfeld was constructing, or reconstructing, Biggers, because he told him, more than anybody else, what to do. It could be that Biggers listened to him more than the rest of us. There was one girl there, Annabel Baker, who was very talented, really





very good. But she and Lowenfeld fought so that he couldn't tell her very much of anything.

For some reason Lowenfeld took me aside once and said, "Why don't you like John Biggers?" At that point I didn't like anybody. [laughter] You know, it didn't matter: John Biggers or him, or anybody else. I didn't know why I didn't like anybody, it was just that feeling that I didn't care about anybody. I didn't dislike people, but I wasn't in love with folks, you know. Lowenfeld thought it was a class thing, but I'm not from a class situation where I felt I was above somebody else. He was trying to find out. I didn't know that I didn't like Biggers, but he said I didn't.

SMITH: Personally, or the work, or both?

LEWIS: Personally, I think personally. I knew Biggers had a drinking problem, even as a student. Possibly this could have something to do with his health problems. But I didn't dislike him. It's just that I didn't associate too much with him because I didn't drink. It's as simple as that. I didn't want to associate with people whose habits were not mine. I was too far away from home to do that. But Grimes was a real case, at Ohio State.

SMITH: A "case." What do you mean by that?

LEWIS: Well, he was an interesting person. He would try to antagonize me so that he could get me moving and get me stirred up—sometimes to the point where I might explode. I don't know whether he was playing with my mind or not, but he became



more than a teacher. I guess of all of the teachers I had, I became personally closer to him to the point where he felt that when he had problems he could come and stay with our family. We sort of adopted him.

SMITH: Oh, really?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. I would go and spend some time with Lowenfeld and his wife, maybe two or three days, and Elizabeth would come here and spend two or three days when she'd come into the country. But Grimes would come and stay two or three months, or half a year, after he retired. He would stay upstairs, and he came to Claremont when we were there. I got him a job teaching at Claremont. We became good friends. Elizabeth and I are good friends, but we never lived around each other. Grimes came to live with us. He was a part of our family.

SMITH: What was it about him that allowed that to develop?

LEWIS: I guess his personality. He was a real Southerner and I didn't like Southerners with Southern accents, but he had a Southern accent. I guess he was trying to understand me and I was trying to understand him. The kids loved him.

SMITH: So did he have all the prejudices that he was supposed to have?

LEWIS: He had them and he knew it, but he didn't want to have them. He would always say, "Well, you know, I was trained this way, to feel superior." He was very blunt and very frank with me about his feelings. When he took a group of students to New York, he made a remark, something that was off-base about race, and I said, "I'll



tell you what. I'm not going to New York with you because you are a racist, and I don't want to go anyplace with a racist." I think that he was pretty shocked, because students don't talk that way to professors. I think from that point on he realized that he was dealing with somebody who wasn't going to take this. It was a challenge to him, and he was basically a good person. He was from Asheville, North Carolina, from one of these pretty good families, married to a Taft daughter. He did his undergraduate work at Cornell University.

I think he recognized that he did have basic prejudices that he said most white people have. We had our conversations, and he would say, "Samella doesn't like white people." And I said, "No, I don't like people who see themselves as white." [laughter] So we had a lot of exchanges that challenged both of us. He was killed in a car accident coming to see us. He was living in Santa Barbara, and I think he was driving down Highway 1. I just heard from his daughter last week.

SMITH: Was he more a buddy than a mentor?

LEWIS: Oh yes, because he would show me his paintings and I would say, "I think you ought to put some white paint on that. I don't think you're a painter." And that was when I was his student. I said, "You're a good teacher, but you're not a painter." That's because we were good friends; we could do that. I didn't do that because I wanted to insult him, I did it because I felt it and believed it. I never saw one painting that he made that I thought was worth keeping. He was a good art historian. He's





the one who's responsible, in a way, for my being able to go to a lot of places, and get Fulbrights. He helped me to get out of the country. He had a wife and kids; he couldn't go anyplace, so he'd send me. Then when his kids were grown or half way grown he would go himself. But before that he would send certain of his students.

SMITH: It doesn't sound like he was that much older than you.

LEWIS: Oh, he had to be twenty years older, at least. He just acted like he wasn't. He was in his late eighties when he was killed, and that had to have been ten, fifteen years ago.

SMITH: Oh. You also worked with Gibson Danes there.

LEWIS: Oh, yes. Gibson Danes at Ohio State. I liked him very much. In fact, he was a good friend and a really good teacher. What did I study with Gibson? History of architecture, something like that. But he and his wife were very good people. I think she's deceased now, but he's probably still alive. But he was one of the special ones for me. I used to go to his parties every Friday night.

SMITH: He had a salon?

LEWIS: Certain graduate students were invited to different houses of faculty members and things like that, and I especially enjoyed Gibson's house and his wife. He's one of the ones I remember fondly, you know. And there was a philosophy teacher I really liked a lot. What was his name? Well, anyway, he took us down to Louisiana with him, not knowing what hardships he was going to suffer with us in the



car.

SMITH: Was he American or European?

LEWIS: American.

SMITH: He was naive, then?

LEWIS: He was naive. Or it might be that I put him on the spot, because he announced to the class that he was going down to Baton Rouge, and did anybody need a ride? And I raised my hand. So what else could he do? It started in Cincinnati, of course, which was our first stop. No motel or hotel would accept us. And this went on and on and on. He couldn't even stay in the black places, and we couldn't stay in the white places. They almost didn't want to sell him gas.

SMITH: Oh, really?

LEWIS: His name was Everett Kircher.

SMITH: Did he teach aesthetics?

LEWIS: No, he taught philosophy. Mary Holmes taught aesthetics. I think she's at Santa Cruz now. She used to be at UCLA. Did you know her, Mary Holmes?

SMITH: No.

LEWIS: She was at Berkeley at one point too, I think. She's been moving around. She might be retired now. I hope so. But Everett taught straight philosophy, and he was one of the ones who brought Susanne Langer there and Ruth Benedict. I found out later that Margaret Mead was on the board of trustees at Hampton while I was



there.

SMITH: Oh, really?

LEWIS: Yes, I didn't know.

SMITH: Did Langer's philosophical approach to art resonate with you, did you find that interesting?

LEWIS: Yes I did. And she also bought some of my work.

SMITH: Oh, really? That's a compliment.

LEWIS: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. I appreciated and admired and found very useful her philosophical approach to art and beauty. I've had a lot of contact with people like Robert Frost, people other than artists, who seem to have filtered into my thinking and into my art. And I hope one day it'll gel.

SMITH: How did you come to know Robert Frost?

LEWIS: I knew Robert Frost from upstate New York.

SMITH: Oh, when you were at SUNY [State University of New York]?

LEWIS: Yes, in the fifties. The dean of the school of liberal arts at SUNY, in Plattsburgh, was a very close friend of Robert Frost's, and Robert Frost used to come and help us with our humanities seminars. David Smith, Robert Frost, and Susanne Langer. We would have our students do the readings and then they would come and give lectures: Pete Seeger came . . . it was wonderful. But Robert Frost was very close to the dean and he was there at least once a quarter. They both went to





Dartmouth [College]. It was amazing because little Plattsburgh was the place where I met more international figures.

SMITH: Well, maybe that we'll hold off for a little later or maybe tomorrow. You mentioned yesterday that in a way you had a hard time at Ohio State, so again, why did you decide to go there? I guess it was Lowenfeld.

LEWIS: It was Lowenfeld. Ohio State had a program, also, where they have accepted more African American students and have graduated more African American Ph.D.'s than any other school in the country. They had some provisions where they have set up scholarships, but I didn't get a scholarship from Ohio State. I got a scholarship from the state of Virginia because they wouldn't allow me to go to the University of Virginia.

SMITH: Oh, okay, I see.

LEWIS: So they had to pay for my expenses to go to Ohio State, or a graduate school of my choice out of the state. I guess Lowenfeld had some connection with setting up this program at Ohio State for more graduate students of African American or African descent. He had something to do with that.

SMITH: Were there other African American students in the art program when you were there?

LEWIS: No, not to my knowledge.

SMITH: Was there an African American community center, or cultural center?



LEWIS: No. I couldn't stay on campus.

SMITH: You couldn't live on campus?

LEWIS: No, I couldn't live on campus. There were approximately four hundred African American students out of forty thousand students at the university, and we couldn't live on campus, we had to live off campus.

SMITH: So the dorms were not integrated, then?

LEWIS: No, the only place that was integrated was the Hillel Center.

SMITH: That's Jewish.

LEWIS: Jewish, yeah. They had some blacks working there and they would have programs pertaining to blacks, but that's the only place where you could have any functions. I had a good friend who was from Kentucky, Carolyn, a white girl, who was studying architecture, and she couldn't stay where I was staying, but we would always visit each other. She could visit me, but I couldn't visit her, because the landladies wouldn't allow that kind of thing. I even had difficulty getting my dissertation typed at Ohio State, because most of the time the typist was white, and because she was white, I couldn't go and take her things. You know, it was very difficult. So we had no campus life as such. But I did paint murals in Columbus, on Long Street, in a barbecue place. I have photographs of the works.

I had friends in Columbus who were at the Columbus School of Fine Arts.

One was William Walker, who painted numerous murals in Chicago. He left



Columbus and went to Michigan, where he painted murals, and then he moved from Michigan to Chicago. He lived with us for a while, in the house that we were renting, but he was a student at the Columbus School of Fine Arts. He's still in Chicago, still alive. He's probably the most famous of the painters on that mural project that they had in Chicago during the 1960s. Anyway, I was painting murals, and I didn't do it on campus, I did it in the community.

SMITH: And you were hired by the owner of the barbecue shop?

LEWIS: Yes. And then he later said the works were too depressing. [laughter] But they stayed there, they didn't paint them out. And when I went back to Columbus, about five years ago, people remembered those murals and told me that the guy had died and they had moved the murals to conserve them.

SMITH: Murals are difficult. They get painted over and destroyed so easily.

LEWIS: Yes, I know, I know. I did a piece of sculpture, a bust of a founder for the Watts/Willowbrook Mental Health Center, and they wanted to clean it up; it was bronze. They cleaned it up by putting some shiny black paint on it. So sometimes even sculptures suffer. They were making it look clean.

SMITH: Oh well.

LEWIS: I've done some murals. I did some in Florida, other than the one in the church.

SMITH: When you were at Florida A. & M. [University]?





LEWIS: Florida A. & M., yes.

SMITH: What was the program that you developed for yourself at Ohio State? It sounds like you were moving around in a lot of different directions, and it eventually winds up being art history, but is it traditional art history at this point?

LEWIS: No, it's one of those things where . . . I was moving around so much. I was in the studio division, I was in art history. Grimes was my principal adviser, and he decided that I had to combine the two, and have a studio art history major. That was one that he constructed for me. It was so funny, because when I went back I was honored by the art education people, and I only had one course in art education at Ohio State. So they just understood that if I was black and I graduated at that time, it must have been art education. It wasn't. They didn't even look up to see what it was. Some of the people did get Ph.D.'s in art education, but I didn't get a Ph.D. in art education, I got one in fine arts and art history.

[Tape IV, Side One]

LEWIS: I had a minor in anthropology, and in order to do that I had to get ninety hours more than the required number of hours to get that degree. I had a concentration on what they call non-Western art.

SMITH: Now, was this Afro-Caribbean?

LEWIS: It was African and Native American. I could go to Northwestern and do the African. I could go to any of the Big Ten schools. I could stay on campus and do



the Native American, because that's what they had in the anthropology department, and because it was the same campus, and they had the Native American museum there, then I could do research under an anthropologist.

SMITH: Who taught Native American art at that time, and what did it mean? Was it something beyond Mesoamerican?

LEWIS: Oh yes, yes. I seem to think of somebody named Wilder. She was a Ph.D. There were two of them. She married another one of the Ph.D. candidates and they both went to the University of Texas at Austin. She was one of the professors in the art department, and over in anthropology the professor was from the University of Minnesota, and there was another one from the University of Chicago. They had some really good teachers in anthropology at that time whose focus was Native American culture and history. I don't know if Ohio State still maintains that museum, but it was probably the best museum they had on campus. In anthropology they had some courses that dealt with Africa, but not really sufficient enough for the African art. Asian art I was able to do by going to Taiwan and I studied in workshops with Sherman Lee at Cleveland, and James Cahill, and people like that.

SMITH: Who did you study African art with at Northwestern?

LEWIS: Herskovits.

SMITH: Oh, Herskovits himself, okay.

LEWIS: Yeah, and at that time Pearl Primus, the anthropologist, was giving lectures



She came to Hampton and gave some lectures. Of course that wasn't graduate work, but I was interested. Also . . . what's her name, she's still alive, the dancer.

SMITH: Katherine Dunham.

LEWIS: Katherine Dunham. Her focus was more Haitian, but it was Herskovits that I worked most with. And those credits were counted at Ohio State, because OSU was a Big Ten school. Northwestern isn't a Big Ten as such, but it's in the complex where transfer units are accepted.

SMITH: What kinds of topics were you setting up for yourself?

LEWIS: I'm trying to think of some of the titles I used, but it had more to do with art as an expression of human relations and things of that sort. I didn't do any of the traditional kinds of things. I did art as an expression of human relations. I saw that as being more important than doing a treatise on the Gothic cathedrals and things of that sort. I was more interested in the people and the art, and in terms of Native American culture I was interested in the role of women. I did a paper on the role of women in the art of Native Americans, and in doing so I found out that they were the principal art makers. Then I was able to go to the different museums. I went to Minnesota and places like upstate New York to study the items, and I also went to the woodlands in the Midwest. Then I ran into the story of Edmonia Lewis. I think I did some good papers.

SMITH: Did that discovery about Native American art then get you thinking about





African art and the role of women in creating African ritual objects?

LEWIS: I was more interested in the African sculptures, the Yoruba in particular, and the movement from a kind of geometric style to realism, then out of realism, you know—the changing styles, depending on the time and the strength of the court. I was especially interested in Nigeria, and later I became interested in Zulu art, in the communications through beadwork and through colors. I became interested in that because of some collections. You don't see many Zulu collections, in terms of the baskets and things of that sort. So I began to work on communication through symbols. I worked on Nigerian cloth of course in terms of women, and the symbolism of the different colors, and what they meant in terms of whether a woman was married, whether she was single, whether she was in mourning, and those different kinds of things. And I also did papers on the Kuba. I liked the distinctive quality of the Kuba—the raffia cloth, and the geometric characteristics rather than the figurative form. I was able to do that because of experiences at Hampton, studying Dr. William H. Sheppard's collection. Hampton has a wonderful Kuba collection. Do you know the Kuba?

SMITH: No I don't, no.

LEWIS: It's the most stylized and most intellectual art form that you can find in Africa, and that was very, very important to me. Few people knew anything about it at that time. They do now, I hope. They knew about the Yoruba, and they knew



about Native American art. All of that came out of Hampton, too, in terms of my returning there to do research. They have probably one of the finest Native American collections in the country, because Hampton was founded for Native Americans first, and then the African Americans came. So they have collected wonderful Native American objects.

SMITH: In terms of Asian art, when did you go to Taiwan? Was that later?

LEWIS: That was later. I went on a Fulbright to Taiwan. I stayed and worked at Tung Hai University in Taiwan, and I studied the Palace Museum collection, and I also studied at Academia Sinica with Dr. Li Chi, who excavated the great Shang bronzes. That's where they have the great Shang bronzes and the Zhou bronzes. So I studied there, and then when I came back I studied three years at USC [University of Southern California] with Dr. Theodore Chen and others, and that was Chinese philosophy, Chinese language, and Chinese art history. In between, in the summers, I went to New York University and studied at the Institute of Fine Arts.

SMITH: It sounds like you were setting yourself up in a situation where you're the person who gets hired to teach non-Western, art, the whole thing. So you're the one person out of a dozen, or whatever.

LEWIS: I didn't know I was doing that, I really didn't; that was not my plan. I am very much interested in Chinese art history and Chinese art, Chinese calligraphy, Chinese painting and perspective, in terms of the way things are seen in Chinese art,



and how different it is from the way we see it. And also Chinese music. I must have been Chinese in another life or something, because I feel in tune with it—probably even more so than the African. I feel very much in tune with Chinese culture, more so than Japanese or any other Asian culture. So it's not just Asian culture, it's Chinese culture. I guess there's something about it that intrigues me, and I feel a part of it. I don't know why or how, but I do. I went to Surinam and found that there's a mixture of Chinese and African culture there.

I had not been that eager about European culture. It just doesn't seem to be as exciting to me, and I think Europeans in general strike me as being positioned almost in an immovable kind of way. They don't seem to be as flexible. Not that the Chinese are that flexible, but they have so many, many things that you can deal with, where you can circle around whatever inflexibility they have. They have so many different approaches to culture. Even the language . . . you know, the sounds are different when you go to different places. I know French is different from German and all of that, but it just doesn't strike me as something that I need to concern myself too much with.

SMITH: What did you write your dissertation on?

LEWIS: I wrote my dissertation on the cultural influences on the history of art, it's really something that they're dealing with now. It had to do with cultural influences on art, and how it's determined. I'm trying to think of the exact title, but I've





absolutely forgotten.

SMITH: Well, we can get that later. But by cultural influences you mean questions of power?

LEWIS: Right, right.

SMITH: So in the Benin court, it's who in the court determines—

LEWIS: Right, what we see and how we see it. It was a question.

SMITH: In that case you have questions of political power and dynastic politics, but you also have questions of spirituality, which are not really separable, but nonetheless you can look at it religiously or you can look at it politically.

LEWIS: Yes. It has to do with the influence of this power, and also the influence of the art after, in determining individual and group relationships. It has to do with that.

SMITH: Was it primarily focused on Africa, or was it cross-cultural?

LEWIS: Cross-cultural. It focuses on the influence of art as a power base.

SMITH: There were, you could say, traditional European art historians like Arnold Hauser—

LEWIS: Right. I used the Gothic period also. I did non-Western, but I also included some Western influences, especially the Gothic period, the cathedrals and the impact that they had in determining people's thinking and social strata.

SMITH: Yes, because that's Western art before the West became the West. And you had people on your committee who were reading bits and pieces of it and knew what



you were doing?

LEWIS: Yes, but they sent it outside too. They had outside readers.

SMITH: Who was on your committee?

LEWIS: Grimes was one, and Everett Kircher. They had people outside of the art department. They usually had about seven people on those committees, I think.

There was also . . . wait now, I'll think of it. His family owned a rubber company. Frank Seiberling, Jr. He was on the committee.

SMITH: And what did he teach?

LEWIS: He taught American art history. Very dull, very, very dull. And I think Mary Holmes was on the committee. They had somebody from outside of the university, I'm trying to think of who that was. It wasn't Herskovits . . . no, it was somebody else, more in the field of non-Western.

SMITH: What about non-Western art history? Asian art history in particular had a literature and a history, so it wasn't something brand new.

LEWIS: No, no.

SMITH: So by doing this cross-culturally you had to develop a vocabulary; you weren't concerned with the traditional issues of when did something get done and organizing it into a sequence.

LEWIS: Yes. And there was literature on African art too, but it wasn't something that I was in tune with or I agreed with.



SMITH: Why is that?

LEWIS: The literature that was on African art was very archaic and very much distorted in terms of there not being an art; there wasn't any art.

SMITH: Even the Benin sculptures?

LEWIS: Absolutely not. This was the period when they wanted to attribute the casting to Europeans, Italians, not to Africans. They said the Africans couldn't have done the casting because they were not civilized to the point of knowing how. The lost-wax technique was used. You knew that.

SMITH: No, I knew it was lost wax, but I didn't think that the lost-wax technique was like building a rocket to go to the moon or something.

LEWIS: Well, they didn't think that the Africans could do it. I think it was only in the 1930s that they found evidence that Africans did indeed do the castings.

SMITH: Oh, I see, okay.

LEWIS: The place that had more of the information was the Field Museum [of Natural History] in Chicago. I could do some work there. And I'm sure that Herskovits helped that situation, because of Northwestern being in the proximity of Chicago. But the Field still has a marvelous collection of Benin art.

SMITH: So you could sit down and work with the originals?

LEWIS: Yes, from a distance. I was very happy when I went to Taiwan, because I was the only researcher from the U.S. interested in the Palace Museum collection at





that time. I went there with twenty-five other scholars on Fulbrights, and I was the only person with any interest in the art, so I had the whole collection all to myself.

SMITH: But then within West African cultures you don't have a concept of art, or this is what I've read, that it's really part of everyday life, and the same word is used often for dance, music, and masking. So there you have it from the other angle.

LEWIS: Right, it only becomes art when we bring it out. But they are ceremonial objects, and religious, spiritual objects. Some of them are used, and every seven years they discard them and go to something new. Not a new image, not a new idea, but a new physical object. No, that's still the case in traditional Africa. They use these things in birth, puberty, marriage, and death. I only know of one culture, the Maasai, where the belief is that when you die you are dead; in the others you are carried away on antelopes and other types of ritual objects. There is a continuation of life and those are items that make it possible. And that's true in traditional Chinese culture also. An elder son is necessary to get you to the other land, so to speak.

SMITH: The way you have described it, I actually can hear a lot of Susanne Langer, trying to understand in a scientific way, art as a basic everyday thought process.

LEWIS: Yes. That's why, in my teaching experiences, I think probably the best place was Plattsburgh. They had no art department. They had two years of humanities that had to be taken before you could major in anything. It was experimental, and we tried things that other places didn't try, and we brought in Africans, we brought in



Queens scholars and things of this sort to help us. We brought in people from many parts of the world, and our president felt that none of us were prepared to do most of what we were doing, because we were doing it in a myopic way.

SMITH: Who was your president?

LEWIS: His name was George Angel. He was a mathematician. And in order to broaden our perspectives he got grants for us to exchange programs for us to go to different places to study different things. Not the same things that we were teaching but things that would enhance our understanding of what we were teaching, and broaden our perspective. A weird man.

SMITH: Interesting.

LEWIS: But he took it on himself to find these places, and we could choose. Of course we didn't have to go to any of his choices if we didn't want to, but we had to find someplace to go in order to secure grants.

SMITH: You mentioned that your approach to art history is really shaped by the fact that you are a painter.

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: So how did your studio art practice, to use the formal term, feed into the way you conceptualized art history?

LEWIS: I could sense influences. If I go to, let's say, another culture, like South America or Cuba, I could sense those indigenous influences that might have affected



work in this country or in European countries, because I am dealing with the object. If somebody shows me something that's historically important, first I appraise it, or peruse it based on my understanding of the evolution of shape, form. I believe I can read into shapes better because I have had studio training. Okay?

SMITH: Okay.

LEWIS: Then I can move on to the art-historical kind of research to try and see if I am correct in assuming that what Wilfredo Lam did and what his grandmother did preceded that which Picasso did. Most people will only look at what Picasso did, and then say, " Well, this is the influence he had on Wilfredo Lam," and it might have been just the opposite, if you know anything about studio art and what comes first. Now, I'm not making this very clear, I know, because it's not clear to me what I am saying, but I am trying to say something. I am trying to say that I can read into forms.

Let's take older cultures: the Nubian and the Egyptian cultures were very close, in great proximity. There's something about Nubian culture, how things are made, the pottery, that will tell me, because I know how to do ceramics, who might have been the better potter or the most important one at what stage. I can look at the ceramics and see that maybe the Egyptians did not influence the Nubians, but the Nubians influenced the Egyptians. Maybe you can help me understand what I am saying, but it's because I know about ceramics, and most art historians do not know that how you put together certain things can show a certain level of maturity. They





do not know that. They only know that it's there, but they don't know the technique; that's really what I am saying. Knowing the technique helps me. I might sit around and look at something for a long, long time, but at the same time I am questioning what I see.

SMITH: So the technique is not simply a technical question, it's also a mental or spiritual question.

LEWIS: Right, right. Most art historians will have maybe a year of studio work. That's not enough for them to understand. They should never become critics or anything of that sort without knowing something about what an artist is doing, you know? You can't critique something that you really don't know about. Art historians are not trained that way. They are trained to pass on information. Some of them become more creative and greater investigators, and they find out who did what, when. But they are not necessarily those people who can go back far enough or can translate from one culture to another, or from one time period to another based on the item itself unless it's documented for them.

SMITH: Which it won't be in most non-Western cultures.

LEWIS: No, no, absolutely. It's kind of crazy.

SMITH: What about the other way around? How has being an art historian, particularly with your global focus, affected your work as an artist, a painter, a serigrapher, a lithographer, etcetera?



LEWIS: Having been an art historian helps me to get a sense of what's out there. I've investigated enough places and enough art forms so that if I want to select from one or the other, it has broadened my potential for being able to have in-depth investigations, or maybe I want to find out how somebody did certain things. So it has opened avenues for me. Yes, it's been very good. You asked me yesterday if I taught studio. I taught studio for a brief period, but I stopped because I found that it tired me out. I was being very empathic, you know, putting myself in the role of the student. It was just exhausting for me, because I spent most of my time being a teacher, without doing the work myself. I didn't want to do that, but how do you translate something and have it so that the student can use it without taking over what that student is doing? I found that very tiring.

When I teach Chinese art history, I don't go beyond a certain point; the history is there, and you can teach it and then you can go home and be creative. But when you teach studio, if you don't want to have people working in your image and likeness, then you've got to give so much that you go home and you go to bed. You know, you eat, maybe you have a glass of wine, and you get ready for the next day. It's a very difficult job.

SMITH: No, I see what you're saying. It's also difficult because you've set up a project which normally is much more divided, where there's a group of people who only think about Chinese art, or maybe they'll think about Asian, and then you have a



whole other group of people who only think about Native American art, and then a third group of people who only think about African art, and they have their own ways of talking about things, which may or may not be influenced by European art history, but that's still the standard, and yet you're trying to think through a project in which you can talk about the creative process, really, as a historical and social phenomenon on a global basis, and to do that you've got to shift your focus out of Europe, because that's most of the people who have created "art."

LEWIS: Yes, we see it as art. That brings to mind, when I was talking about Chinese art history, I found a lot of Africa in China, which satisfied me immensely. I had to do that by going to the Jesuits; they were some of the real investigators in terms of Africa and China, and China in particular. Of course, during the Shang Dynasty, they had images that looked like what we call pre-Columbian art, you know, the *taotie* symbols and things of that sort. Then later on, in the Zhou Dynasty, you had the so-called invention of glass that worked with the art forms.

Then you begin to move into other areas where you had mention of the *Negritos* marrying the Chinese women. And I said, "The *Negritos*. Who are these people?" Nobody ever explained who the *Negritos* were until recently. They've started to explain they were the black dwarfs that migrated. So people say, "How did they get there?" Well, they see Africa the way it is now, but there was a connection. The black dwarfs were able to migrate into south China and they





"intermarried"—quote unquote. The south Chinese are like little dwarfs compared to the northern Chinese. They are much darker than the northern Chinese. So I began to put things together, and I double-checked with the Jesuits on the *Negritos* and who they were. Then of course the Tang Dynasty was open, and in some areas there were Chinese brides and African grooms.

I began to think about why I was so interested in China. It was of course the calligraphy, the pottery and a lot of things, but it was also its connection to Africa. And it was the Jesuits who guided me in this. I went into the hill country in Taiwan and I found people who were the so-called "original" Taiwanese, the indigenous Taiwanese, and they were like the plains Native Americans here—similar ceremonies and so on. Of course we have that land bridge theory, and we don't know whether the Native Americans are Asians or whether the Asians are Native Americans. I don't know if you've been to Senegal, where the people have eyes shaped like Asians, and some of the Nigerians have eyes like some Asians. You would think that they were Asians if they were not so dark. I've been to Fiji and people on the Pescadores Islands, where they settled before reaching Asia, are mostly African. Many Africans were seafaring people, so if they were able to get that far, there was a close connection to Asia. And then some of the African areas were developed by Asians. So it's that connection. I think that really speaks more to the issue of Asia and Africa and why I found myself connected to both Asia and Africa. Also, the tradition of



historical records are more prominent in Asia, especially in China and Japan. Japan has more on China than China has on China, because the Japanese had preserved a lot of the Asian culture in terms of historical documents.

SMITH: Were there other people who had the same kind of interest in finding global connections and developing a language for talking about art history in a non-Eurocentric way?

LEWIS: The only other people I found at that time were the Jesuits. They wrote papers. Many were not published, but they have unpublished papers that speak to these connections, especially in Asia and Africa. I'm sure there must have been others. There was someone who did something on South America, *They Came Before Columbus* [Ivan van Sertima]. He was in Surinam, I think. He teaches at Rutgers University.

[Tape IV, Side Two]

LEWIS: There were some great people at Ohio State who challenged me to the point where I knew I had to do what I had to do and I couldn't depend on a support system that would help me move into the outer world and do what I wanted to do. I was smart enough not to take a job there. They did offer me a job when I graduated, but to have taken it would have been a big mistake. So it wasn't all bad, but it was during a period when things were pretty rough. And that's all I wanted to say about that.

SMITH: When did you start attending the College Art Association meetings, and



was there anything in CAA that was helpful to the kind of project that you were developing?

LEWIS: I guess I started going maybe ten years ago. I might have gone to an occasional meeting when they met in New York, but I really didn't start participating until about ten years ago.

SMITH: Were there anthropological meetings you went to?

LEWIS: Yes, I would also go to the Asian meetings . . . what was it called. I can't remember the name of the group now. And I was on the Fulbright committee to examine a lot of things. The group I'm thinking of has to do with Asian art, aesthetics or something.

SMITH: Well, we can get that later. As I understand, the field that they call aesthetic anthropology is relatively new. Maybe it was starting to develop at the same time that you were doing this. I'm thinking of work like Jacques Maquet's, over at UCLA.

LEWIS: Right. But I was more interested in Asia meetings, and the College Art was more general. I don't know that anything happened there that helped me. It was mostly dominated by the Princeton folks. And I don't think anything really happened that I felt I was learning much from. When I went to the College Art Association meetings I think I was seen as a person who might be just interested in African American art, and not as a person who had any training in Asian art or anything of





that sort. So I didn't fight it. I just did what I could do to help and I helped them with their finances and things of that sort. I gave a little party for them out here and raised about \$30,000 and gave it to them.

SMITH: Oh, that's nice.

LEWIS: Yeah. I think they have a program where they are giving scholarships.

SMITH: That's good. This issue of aesthetic anthropology . . . were there people like Maquet, whose work was of interest to you?

LEWIS: Yes, absolutely, but they didn't have a division at CAA that dealt with any of that really.

SMITH: It seems like art historians in the Caribbean would be people who ought to be engaged with what you are doing because their own national cultures are this amalgamation of global influences.

LEWIS: Yes, but they have very few things on the Caribbean. I guess I could have provoked them and promoted some of these things, but I was busy getting my Caribbean show going, and working in the area myself.

SMITH: Well, wrapping up for today, let me ask about community life in Columbus. You had a life outside of the university, I assume.

LEWIS: Oh yes, oh yes.

SMITH: I know you've mentioned that you were involved with the [Henry] Wallace campaign a little bit.



LEWIS: I was, definitely.

SMITH: Was that because of Elizabeth Catlett prodding you?

LEWIS: No, I just felt that I liked Henry Wallace and we were involved in a lot of things that you might call progressive. We were politically active and with no persuasion from anybody, except that Paul's father had been involved in some things in the Cleveland, the Futuranic League, fighting discrimination and things of that sort, and I had been involved as a shop steward at Hampton, and so we went to a lot of things in Columbus. We would go on Long Street and hear Cannonball Adderley and Nancy Wilson, and we were very active in the community as such. A lot of those people who are still there remember who we were. Columbus was not then a very large place. It's grown since, but there was Long Street and not much else for blacks in terms of their activities. We brought Paul Robeson there, and they had a big riot, of course.

SMITH: How did you and Paul [Lewis] meet?

LEWIS: At Ohio State.

SMITH: You were both students at the same time. What was he studying?

LEWIS: At that time he was studying electrical engineering, and then he moved into mathematics. He went to Syracuse for a master's in mathematics. But he was doing electrical engineering then. His father insisted, sort of.

SMITH: No, that's a good trade. More than a trade.



LEWIS: Yeah, but he was more in tune with the humanities. At that time he was speaking French fluently and he was from a family where they practiced French and other languages. He liked languages, he liked reading, so, you know . . . electrical engineering? But that's what he was studying.

SMITH: So you just met on campus?

LEWIS: We lived across the street from each other. He lived in a house where they kept the fellows, and I lived in a house where the girls were kept, and they were facing each other. We used to walk home together. Paul's father owned a wholesale ice cream company in Cleveland.

SMITH: So he was a quite successful businessperson?

LEWIS: Oh yes, absolutely. I guess they had thirteen kids. Paul was in the middle. His father lived in Canada, then Boston, and Paul was born in Indiana. They lived in Minneapolis, in a lot of places, and in each place [Paul's father] had a business. He had a car wash business in one place. He worked in the circus in Canada. He was quite a person. But this wholesale ice cream was the last business that he had. He was very successful. And he had all those kids working too.

SMITH: So, you and Paul get married in—

LEWIS: In '48, when we were students at OSU.

SMITH: And how many children do you have?

LEWIS: Two sons. One was born in '51 and one in '55.





SMITH: What did you have to go through to balance having a family and those responsibilities and having a professional career? Was it easy or tough to do?

LEWIS: I didn't pay any attention to what it was. I just did it. I didn't sit down and decide whether it was easy or difficult or anything. It wasn't easy, but it wasn't difficult, let's put it that way. Paul always helped, and we did what we could do best. You know, there were certain things that he could do better than I could do. I could cook better than he could, but he could make the beds up better than I could. We still do that. We both wash dishes. We have a dishwasher but we don't use it.

We had only one apartment, when we got married, but later we wanted our children to have the space to do things that maybe wouldn't be good for apartment living, and we wanted a yard, so we always sacrificed so we could get a house. As soon as we had the first child we bought a house. My mother had mortgaged her house to get us the money to put a down payment on the first house, and that was in Columbus. So in doing that, we had space for the kids to do their art or do whatever they wanted to do, as soon as they got big enough to handle certain materials. And it kept them busy. We taught them to do things that would entertain them and that gave us some free time. When the older boy was born, Mary Holmes gave him his first toy, and we were sort of adopted by the art faculty.

SMITH: Oh, that's nice.

LEWIS: I didn't have to go to school because the older boy was born before I got my



Ph.D., and Grimes would come over and help me with my dissertation, so that part was easy.

SMITH: What about traveling around to do research, with two kids?

LEWIS: My mother was always available to come and stay; she had her house in New Orleans but she didn't have to worry about it. So any time we needed her she would come and stay. She'd stay for six months, she'd stay for a year. Whenever we needed her she was always available. Paul's family was in Cleveland but they were all working, they couldn't do anything to help. It was my mother who saw us through all of this, and then we had a friend from Trinidad who stayed with us. She was an older woman and she didn't want to stay in the dormitory—you could stay in the dormitory then—but she stayed with us. Most of the time I would go on trips alone, to Asia and other places, and Paul would stay home, because he had a job.

SMITH: I was going to ask what Paul did, and how that fit in with your work.

LEWIS: He taught.

SMITH: He taught. Oh, okay. So when you moved from campus to campus he would also be moving?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: And would it be that sometimes he got the job and you were the spousal hire, and vice versa?

LEWIS: Most of the time I got the jobs, because I was the one with the Ph D , but



he could teach in the high schools, and junior college.

SMITH: So he taught mathematics?

LEWIS: Mathematics. He taught the new math, from Syracuse, where it was started, so he could always get a job, whereas, as an art historian or an artist, I couldn't always get a job. But Paul was a very different kind of person from the average "male," quote, unquote. He's much more in tune with family life. I guess he was one of those people who saw women as equal for a long time; he never felt that men were superior to women and that a woman should follow the man—or vice versa; it was working together. He grew up as a Christian Scientist, by the way.

SMITH: Oh, is he still a practicing Christian Scientist?

LEWIS: I think mentally he is, but physically he doesn't go to the Christian Science churches because I think his sister went and there was some hostility there that smelled of racism, you know.

SMITH: That's disappointing when you hear about things like that.

LEWIS: Yes. So he's from a Christian Science family.

SMITH: Now, was Columbus was the first time you had lived in the north? I guess Columbus is the north. Was it different than when you were in the south?

LEWIS: I had lived in California for one summer.

SMITH: Oh. Here in Los Angeles?

LEWIS: Yes. And I found it very different from the way it is now. At that time, in





the forties, the Mexicans and the blacks were very close, and I see the breach now between them; it's really unbelievable. In Ohio I found it different in terms of the food; I had never had kale before, I remember that. Also the speech patterns were different. But the atmosphere was not free of racism and all that . . . no, no. No, I didn't find it different at all. Possibly the south was a little better to be in, in that you didn't expect so much, but also you had an idea of what you were dealing with, whereas in Columbus and places like that there was so much racism that you just couldn't believe it, and so much hostility. You couldn't even get a paper typed.

SMITH: How were you supposed to do your work?

LEWIS: You had to find a black person to do it and if you couldn't find a black person then you had to do it yourself. It was unbelievable.

SMITH: That sounds so irrational.

LEWIS: It was. I found Columbus a very, very racist place. A lot of hostility. It was much more so than Virginia, of course.

SMITH: Oh, really? Was Virginia less hostile than Louisiana?

LEWIS: Well, you see, I can't measure that because I was mostly in Hampton, and Hampton was a different kind of place; the university sort of controlled the area. And I didn't know Norfolk that well, but because it was a Naval training place, it was probably pretty bad.

SMITH: I would think so. So maybe Hampton was better than Louisiana.



LEWIS: Hampton was better, but even though New Orleans was segregated, we could exert some hostility. We had our times when we could do things. If you did something, you weren't jailed as quickly as you would be in Los Angeles, you know? Because the black population was probably the dominant population, really, even then. So we did exert some hostility and some power—more than would be expected. We had what we called Bump Night. Ever heard of Bump Night? On Friday nights you would just go and bump all the white people off the sidewalk. You know, just mistakenly bump them. [laughter] That was a part of releasing tension. They knew that they weren't supposed to be on the sidewalk on Friday nights in certain areas. We didn't go in their neighborhood and do it, you know, just in the general areas.

SMITH: So it was in the mixed areas, the downtown?

LEWIS: Yes. It was like a little game, but at least it helped with the tension. You knew you could do something.

SMITH: And the police didn't try to stop you?

LEWIS: Oh, no. No.

SMITH: So it was a ritual?

LEWIS: Yeah.

SMITH: Maybe even a purification?

LEWIS: Yes. Oh, absolutely. So it wasn't so bad.



SMITH: Well, maybe we should end for the day.

LEWIS: On Bump Night. [laughter]





SESSION THREE: 20 MAY, 1997

[Tape V, Side One]

SMITH: I wanted to ask you if you had any further thoughts about anything you've said in the previous two days.

LEWIS: No, except that I wondered why I said some of the things I did. [laughter]  
No, I'm just kidding. There was one question you asked me about what we did at Hampton for pleasure and so forth. Well, we spent part of the weekends with Lowenfeld, at his home, or with his friend Karla Longré at her home, and when I say "friend" there was a Mrs. Lowenfeld, but he also had this friend, Karla. And Karla had a friend, who dealt with animals. What is that?

SMITH: Oh, a zoologist?

LEWIS: A zoologist. She studied larger animals, like lions and tigers. We spent alternate weekends with the faculty, who were friends of Lowenfeld. Sometimes we spent the evening or the night, or we just spent a day or two, going back and forth. They were all in walking distance.

SMITH: Did everybody more or less live on campus? I noticed there were a lot of older homes on campus.

LEWIS: On campus or near the campus. Lowenfeld lived just off campus; it was really within half a block. I spent most of my weekends painting, in the art department. I wasn't as sociable as some of the other students. It was only on



holidays that I would go to Norfolk or someplace to dance or to do other things, but I wasn't so sociable. That's why Lowenfeld wondered if I liked some of the students, because I didn't fraternize as much as most of them.

SMITH: Did you read a lot at this time?

LEWIS: Yes, I did. I had Jay Saunders Redding as a professor, I don't know if you know of him.

SMITH: No, I don't.

LEWIS: He had won a very special prize in literature, the North Carolina prize. Jay Saunders left Hampton and went to Cornell, and he was really quite a major author at that time. I knew of his books and I read his books, and he sort of guided me in my reading. He taught Shakespeare and Chaucer, and I became interested in reading mostly old literature, rather than contemporary. But I did read a lot. I guess that's when I first read Malraux.

SMITH: Did you read contemporary African American novelists, like Richard Wright?

LEWIS: Yes, oh yes. I had read Richard Wright before going to Hampton. I had read Richard Wright at Dillard. Richard Wright was a very good friend of Margaret Walker, who was Elizabeth's roommate at Iowa. In fact, Wright was really sort of a boyfriend of Margaret Walker's. Elizabeth introduced me to the works of Langston Hughes and Richard Wright and most of those people. But at Hampton most of my



professors seemed to be focused more on European literature of the past, rather than contemporary works.

SMITH: Were you familiar with Jean Toomer or Claude McKay?

LEWIS: Oh, yes.

SMITH: So these were well-known names?

LEWIS: Absolutely. There was a man, the drama teacher at Dillard. I think I mentioned his name yesterday, but he introduced me to many of the great black writers and poets. And then Xavier had a series on black writers, so not only did you read about them or talk about them, but they also had dramatizations of their works. So that was part of our entertainment on weekends in New Orleans.

It was difficult leaving New Orleans and going to Hampton. Not only food-wise but entertainment-wise, New Orleans is quite a different place from Hampton. I was a little depressed when I first went to Hampton, because I had never lived in a place like that.

SMITH: Though it's a very beautiful setting.

LEWIS: It's a very beautiful setting; that was the first time I saw snow, I had never seen snow before. It was very different for me, and I didn't quite know how to adjust to it. Lowenfeld helped me with my adjustment, he really did, because he became a father figure; I was far away from home. It was quite an adjustment to make.

SMITH: Of course at that time long distance phone calls were not something that





you did all the time.

LEWIS: I couldn't have afforded them anyway. I had more funds when I was at Hampton because I did have that summer job illustrating a book for the Navy, and I had other work that I was doing for somebody, but it was still difficult. I think the most difficult thing was adjusting to the food. That's really strange, but I was accustomed to the New Orleans food, and that can make quite a difference in the way you see things and the way you feel about a place. Interestingly enough, my first roommate was Hazel Biggers; she married John Biggers. Hazel Hales was her name then. And we've remained friends for all these years.

SMITH: Also a painting student?

LEWIS: No, she was in accounting. When John [Biggers] went to Texas Southern [University], she went there also, as a person in the accounting department; she was not a teacher. When I was at Hampton there were some really important people there, like Rudolf Aggrey, who became ambassador to Senegal. His father was head of the Aggrey house in London; he was from Ghana. Quite a few Africans were there. Harry Belafonte was there, in the Navy. His first wife, Marguerite, was "Miss Hampton" one year. He really started out singing semi-professionally at Hampton, in the glee club there. Duke Ellington introduced his *Black, Brown and Beige Symphony* at Hampton; that's where it premiered. So a lot of good things happened there, and I would go to all of those performances. But I didn't go to many of the



dances and things of that sort.

SMITH: Was there an ideology of negritude there, of a Pan-African diasporic culture?

LEWIS: The women there seemed to have been the ones to become involved in such a movement. There was a woman writer there, and also a woman in drama. I can't remember the name of the woman who was most active, but she's still alive. She left Hampton and went to Howard. She brought Zora Neale and Pearl Primus, and a number of other people like that into her classes. Her performances were based on negritude. She is very famous. In fact, I had a course with her. [Her name is Anne Cook]. It's funny, when you mention Hampton and the literature and things of that nature, you always come up with the names of males, not the females. I can't recall that there was a general movement in terms of negritude. One of the presidents of Hampton when I was there was from the Virgin Islands. His name was Morón, and we used to call him moron. [laughter] We probably had good cause.

SMITH: Well, you have alluded a couple of times that you came to think of at least aspects of Hampton as "the enemy," and I wonder if you could explain how that sense of rupture with Hampton developed. I guess a lot had to do with the treatment of Lowenfeld.

LEWIS: It was the treatment of Lowenfeld, and the attitude regarding the art department. It was as though we were castaways and there was no regard and



respect for any of that. Hampton was mostly a trade school when I was there. They had a great education program and professional program in terms of engineering, but the focus was to a large extent on the trades. I don't think they had any real enlightened leadership while I was there, so it was that kind of thing that made me wonder whether I was at the right place or not.

I had real fights at Hampton. Hampton had an exchange program with Vassar College, and I was chosen to be one of the persons to go to Vassar and then a Vassar student would come to Hampton. The dean of women told me that I couldn't go unless I straightened my hair, because they were embarrassed by it. I said I wouldn't straighten my hair, and it became a big controversy at Hampton. It went to the president, and the president said I had to do what the dean of women said, and then it got to Lowenfeld, and Lowenfeld defended my point of view. But I had these running battles. First it was the black Christ thing and then it was the hair straightening, and it was one battle after the other. So you can see where I had a somewhat distasteful kind of opinion of some of the administrators there.

SMITH: Was that just taken for granted that you would do what the dean of women said?

LEWIS: Of course, of course. But I just wouldn't do it. They wanted to primp me up to go to Vassar, to "present me," and I insisted on being myself. Refusing to straighten my hair had nothing to do with negritude or anything of that sort, it's just





that I didn't want to straighten my hair. I had a lot of hair, but I wasn't unhappy with it. I think you've seen the photograph.

SMITH: Yes, it looks lovely.

LEWIS: There was nothing wrong with my hair. But it was too crinkly for them, they wanted it straight, because I would be in company with the other girls who had straight hair. Not most, but many of them.

So for the period I was there, every year there was some kind of controversy that was around me. I was never without controversy, and I felt I wasn't doing anything to cause it. There were other occasions when I didn't behave properly, you know; I just didn't obey, that's all it was. I wasn't an upper middle-class snob; I'm not that kind of person. Certainly I wasn't from that kind of background and I wasn't going to pretend to be that way. I did many of the things they said I should do, I went to chapel, and—

SMITH: Oh, chapel attendance was mandatory?

LEWIS: I really didn't go to chapel every Sunday, I went to the programs where they would sing the spirituals, at Ogden Hall, but I didn't go to church chapel, I have to retract that. They would bring us together every Sunday afternoon, and they would have programs where we would sing the spirituals and we would listen to somebody give a lecture, but that was okay. I didn't mind that, but I did not go to church on campus, no. I think I was a good student.



I guess it was the same way at Dillard. The president was giving a lecture in the auditorium and he mentioned something about Elizabeth. He didn't call her by name but he referred to her as someone who was bringing people to campus, and I think he was talking about Paul Robeson, who had a "tainted reputation." Something happened, I don't know exactly what, but I walked out. I felt that I had to show my disdain and distaste for that kind of situation and I was ready to suffer the consequences. I guess I carried that with me to Hampton, and I just was not going to be pushed into somebody else's mold. Those are the two really outstanding incidents that I can think of where I was in a battle about something that had nothing to do with education. Superficial kinds of things, you know.

But I had some good teachers there. Kinshasha [H.] Conwill's, father, Moses Holman, was my teacher. I remember Kinshasha when she was a little kid on campus. I have real fond memories of the people, but some of the administrative policies . . . I don't know. Usually they don't filter down to students, but somehow I got involved in things that should have stayed on an administrative level.

SMITH: Well, why don't we look at these folders you have brought out, containing some of your artwork. The first one you've got here is the picture of the *Everyday Christ* figure. One of the things I mentioned yesterday off-tape was the boy.

LEWIS: The same boy is in both, yes.

SMITH: Right, and I asked you if you had a model.



LEWIS: No, I didn't have a model. I didn't use models at that time. I had studied three years with Alfredo Galli and I didn't need a model in terms of knowing the structure of the face and the body, so I could just use my own ideas about how I should position figures and how they should feel, because it was the way I was feeling. But this is really not for me a Christ figure as much as a spiritual figure, and I guess that's why he doesn't have thorns and things of that sort. I didn't feel that the people who thought that this person's color should be changed had enough spirituality to deserve to have this work, money or no money, you know? So it hadn't been paid for, and I refused to accept the money because I refused to change the color.

The color didn't mean that much to me in the beginning, not until they began protesting. It was just a natural thing for me. I think if I had been living in China, and most of the people around me looked Chinese, and if I had been Chinese, the figure would have been Chinese. I really didn't say, "Well, I'm just going to make an African American figure," it just came out naturally that way. I was thinking of a good person, and that person could have been white, but I didn't think I wanted him white surrounded by nothing but African Americans. It just seemed to be what it was supposed to be. Now, if I had had absolutely a mixed group, he could have easily been white.

SMITH: Or not.

LEWIS: Or not. He could have been what he is. So the spiritual aspects of it





seemed more important to me, and that had to be with the goodness of the person. I tried to put myself in the frame of mind where I could reflect this. But you can see what happens when you try to reflect goodness.

SMITH: Now this was the army that first objected?

LEWIS: The first person who objected was the person who was chaplain at the black chapel, and when I say the "black chapel" I mean it was for the black troops. He was the first one who came back and said, "No, this will be offensive to the white soldiers." Well, the white soldiers didn't go into the black chapel. He was a Morehouse [College] graduate, an African American man. Maybe his commander had approached him, but his commander hadn't seen it. He was the only one who had come back to inspect it, and he probably went back and told the commander that this person was making this image that reflected Christ and it was a black image. Of course it wasn't the right thing at that time, I guess, and the next thing I knew the commander of the base came to talk to the president, who asked Lowenfeld to ask me to change it. Lowenfeld left it completely up to me, but he was so happy when I said, "No, I will not change it." He almost cried he was so happy. But he couldn't tell me not to change it. You can't imagine how much these experiences affect you. You ask yourself, "Am I in a war zone? Where am I?"

SMITH: Well, that's because Hampton should have been a place of safety. I mean, no college should be a threatening place to its students, but particularly in that time



and that place you should have felt that you were at home and protected. What might happen in Norfolk, Virginia is—

LEWIS: Altogether different. But I guess I felt secure in the art building upstairs, where the paintings were, and I guess that's why I stayed there most of the time.

Lowenfeld got permission for us to stay out until about midnight, to work.

SMITH: Oh, there were curfews?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. You had to be in about nine or ten o'clock, or something like that. But he got permission for us to stay longer. Yes, you had to be in the dormitory before a certain hour.

SMITH: I see. Or else you are a bad person.

LEWIS: Oh, you were reprimanded. I've forgotten what could happen to you, but you could have been really punished. You could have been sent home, dishonorably discharged.

SMITH: I guess this is the period when colleges were still treating their students as children.

LEWIS: Yes, well, this was not a university then. I think there were about six hundred students at Hampton then, maybe a thousand, I don't know, but it was small. It was a beautiful campus with a small student population.

SMITH: That also means that you must have known all the faculty and they all knew you.



LEWIS: Yes. Strangely enough, there is a woman there who was my teacher; she's still there teaching, and she looks like she looked when I was there. [laughter] There are those people aren't there? Etta Moton looks that way too; her daughter is seventy, and Etta looks younger than her daughter. She's still wearing her spiked heels and she has to be in her nineties. She looks fabulous. Lois [Mailou] Jones looks pretty good for her age too, she's ninety-two. She looks very good. But I was just shocked that the same woman who taught me was still there. I went back for the 125th anniversary of Hampton, they had a big celebration, and there she was. Who is this woman? I thought it was her daughter or granddaughter or something. It was the same woman.

SMITH: That's interesting. I guess this is the sculpture that you started doing.

LEWIS: Yes, I did that. It was in Lowenfeld's book *Creative and Mental Growth*; it was something on the casting process. I was telling you [off-tape] what happened. It was quite a large piece, probably about two and a half or three feet, a mother and child figure. I was telling you that I felt that my works were my children, and when I got ready to leave I couldn't take it, so I took a sledgehammer to it and broke it up. It was plaster but it was patina-ed with oil paint. I was trying to think of the Toni Morrison novel, *Beloved*, you remember?

SMITH: Oh right, yes.

LEWIS: I just didn't want to leave anything in the enemy camp. At that point I didn't





like the chair of the art department and I didn't like the president, so it was all the administration again.

SMITH: But you did leave those two paintings.

LEWIS: No. Oh, those two paintings were put in storage in the chapel, or someplace, and then somebody probably put them out.

SMITH: And one now belongs to the president?

LEWIS: One now belongs to the president and one belongs to Hampton, to the museum. This one belongs to the museum, and the one that you saw in the exhibit was one that belonged to the president. These were there, but I somehow managed to take *Waterboy* and the one of the sharecropper family. I don't know how, but I did. I didn't take them off the stretcher and roll them up, and they were sizeable paintings, at least 30 in. x 36 in. or 36 in. x 40 in. But how they ended up here, with all the traveling I've done, I don't know, but then I sent them back to Hampton.

SMITH: As a donation to their collection?

LEWIS: I think they purchased one.

SMITH: Did they already have a small museum at that point?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. They've had a museum for the past hundred years.

SMITH: So there was a lot of interesting work surrounding you when you were a student there.

LEWIS: Yes. The Sheppard African collection is one of the finest in the country.



They also had Tanners and they had some African works, paintings and things of that sort. When I was there the museum was on the second floor of the academy building; they've just moved from there now. They also sent the Sheppard collection to the Virginia [Museum of Fine Art] for safekeeping one year when I was there.

SMITH: Oh, during the war?

LEWIS: No, it was after the war. I think they didn't have enough space to store it properly and Lowenfeld asked the Virginia Museum to take it for a year or more and then Hampton got it back.

SMITH: You had a landscape in the show [solo exhibition at the Hampton University Museum in 1997]. I don't know if it's the same painting. I don't think so.

LEWIS: No, it's not the same.

SMITH: You have a very heavy impasto effect, and these paintings are from the fifties.

LEWIS: Right. Forties and fifties.

SMITH: Your oil painting style changed very much then.

LEWIS: Right. That's when I began using the palette knife. I liked it better than the brush. I could hold more paint on it and even when I did colors that were not juxtaposed next to each other I could work the paint like a plastic, pliable substance. I didn't mix so much as do overlays and things of that sort. I liked treating the work with the knife. I think also there was an aggressive tendency there that helped me to



cool down, you know what I'm saying? Instead of using my mental properties in a way that would not be helpful to me, this aggressive kind of movement helps me to calm myself so that I am able to think better. I'm not as brutal about situations as I might tend to be. You know what I mean.

SMITH: Yeah. You were probably in Tallahassee when you painted this. Is this a Florida scene?

LEWIS: I'm not sure where I was. I might have been.

SMITH: Or did you paint from imagination?

LEWIS: I painted mostly from imagination. This other one was a Louisiana scene of course, this one here. But I wasn't in Louisiana when I did it, I was in Virginia, I think. I sent it to the Atlanta University show and it won the second prize in printmaking, I remember that.

SMITH: Does it have a title?

LEWIS: *Trapper's Rest*.

SMITH: What kinds of colors did you use?

LEWIS: Tans and somber colors . . . it was a bayou scene and the bayous are not blue. This one is like *The Iceman Cometh*, you know; I used to read a great deal. But it represented the little happiness in this man's life and this man is a group figure; it's a figure representing a lot of people. And he's trying to save the ice, which means that he's trying to save that little bit of happiness in his life so that it can continue.





That's really what it's about. It's on masonite, I remember that, and I think that's a combination of the knife and the brush.

SMITH: Is this after you left Hampton?

LEWIS: Yes. That's probably 1951, or something like that. It might be close to that bayou period. But this is definitely the bayou, this is *Southern Exposé* and that's the landowner, of course, standing beneath the columns.

SMITH: I see.

LEWIS: That's been a subject that I have been working on continuously.

SMITH: The bayou country?

LEWIS: The bayou, but also the oppression. This man wants to learn and he is being inhibited by his environment, by those around him, and those who are not inhibiting him see but they don't see. And it goes on and on and on.

SMITH: Is this one a painting?

LEWIS: It's a painting, and that's the one I told you I did with house paint. It's on a wallboard, and the paint is Gliddens house paint, which is an interior paint.

SMITH: You were living in Jeanerette at this time?

LEWIS: In Olivier.

SMITH: Did people in the community come by and look at your work at all?

LEWIS: No, the only time people saw my work was when Ruth Roane gave an opening for me, so to speak, at her house, and they were mostly white people. No



black people came. I don't think she invited any black people. But I worked to a large extent in her home because she had the facilities. When I did the smaller watercolors I worked outside, from imagination. There was no space in my aunt's house for paint. You either went to bed, or you ate, or . . . I don't think they knew what I was doing.

SMITH: I was asking because I was thinking of Elizabeth Catlett's statement where she says that she isn't painting her wants as an artist but she's trying to find out what the needs of the people are.

LEWIS: Well, I was trying to find out what the people were like, and portraying them. I was trying to get a sense of who the people were, and depicting that kind of essence or substance rather than trying to do something that the people would understand and use or appreciate. I was doing something different.

[Tape V, Side Two]

LEWIS: [Referring to a black-and-white photograph of one of her early bayou paintings] You can't pull yourself up by your bootstraps if you don't have any boots. So that's what that was about. In a way, it was kind of propaganda, of course, but I think most art is propaganda.

SMITH: This is the same series.

LEWIS: A similar theme. It could be a ball but it is an apple when you see it in color. But you can almost see the pain there.



SMITH: Yeah.

LEWIS: This one was so strong to me that I couldn't even sleep in the same room with it. It represented a composite of people and of individuals.

SMITH: That you were living with?

LEWIS: Among. And here's another one.

SMITH: That's very powerful.

LEWIS: Yes, that's one of the one's that somebody bought. I don't know where it is, you see. It's a very strong piece. It's on masonite. Most of these are on masonite.

SMITH: So it's somewhere in Louisiana.

LEWIS: It's somewhere out there . . . yeah.

SMITH: That's really interesting.

LEWIS: There are a lot of them out there. I have some I did in Alabama with the children playing in the clay, and a lot of railroad tracks . . . the whole schmear.

SMITH: In this one you have reintroduced a sculptural form so that the shoulder feels like it's lifting out of the canvas.

LEWIS: But this is a time when I don't think I had to do very much except paint. My Aunt Laura did all the cooking. Even though she worked out, she came home and cooked, because I certainly couldn't cook well enough for her, and certainly not for Uncle Dile. [laughter] He was quite, quite something. So it was a great, great time for me, a wonderful time. Hardly anybody wore any shoes. We were right on





the bayou, the bayou was in back of us. Sometimes I'd go out in the back by the oak trees where the moss was and there were snakes hanging out of the trees. I didn't bother the snakes of course, and they didn't bother me. It was a great period in my life.

SMITH: Did Galli or Lowenfeld or Catlett teach you perspective?

LEWIS: Elizabeth taught me perspective. Lowenfeld to some extent, but Elizabeth made a real effort to teach me perspective. And also I had perspective in high school.

SMITH: Oh, in drafting, right, yes.

LEWIS: In drafting, yes, so all of that carried. I guess I might say that I was not a bad student. I remembered things from one phase to the next.

SMITH: Yeah, the way that limb goes back over the water, that's—

LEWIS: Somebody, one of my teachers, told me, "You should learn something so well that you can forget it and use it, and alter it for your own purposes." I don't know which one told me that. Or whether I read that someplace. But that's what I felt I needed to really know so that I could convert things to my own liking.

SMITH: How large is this sculptural figure of a man reading?

LEWIS: It's only about fourteen or fifteen inches, something like that. That's not a very large piece, if I remember correctly. Certainly no more than twenty inches. It's plaster, and Lowenfeld would teach us to finish our plaster; that's not stone.

SMITH: Okay. I thought it was stone. So you sculpted it by hand then.



LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: Does that still survive?

LEWIS: I don't know. They have never said anything. It was interesting . . . I had the newspaper clipping about the Virginia Museum's purchase of it, but when I went to get the photograph, about a month later, they told me that they didn't have any works of mine in the Virginia Museum. I assured them that they did, and I called the woman who sent the check, so she made them photograph it and send me a print. They denied having it.

SMITH: The image of somebody with a book is something that seems to tie across all of your work.

LEWIS: Right. The book is very important symbol. Of course it's one of learning, but it also has taken on other symbolic meanings for me. It goes through and through, I don't know. In spite of the way I talk about education, I view it as the discipline and as the experience that I think all of us should have.

SMITH: Maybe for different reasons than some of the powerful people want us to have it for.

LEWIS: Yes, right, absolutely. That's one of my first efforts at sculpture. I did that in New Orleans, I'm sure.

SMITH: So, at Dillard, or while you were in high school?

LEWIS: At Dillard. I didn't do any sculpture in high school.



SMITH: That's a mother and child figure, or two siblings?

LEWIS: Two siblings. I have another one of a mother and children. You should come across it pretty soon. And of course this goes back to that same period, in the bayou area.

SMITH: This theme of abstract diagonals seems to be a new feature in your work.

LEWIS: Right. I know about style, and I know about developing one style, but I always allow the subject to determine the style—and the way I feel about it. It could easily have been something different, but I don't try to maintain a consistency. I just do what I want to do when I want to do it, and that hasn't been detrimental, because even before I came out of Hampton I was selling everything I made.

I have never had to ask for a gallery. When I came out here I was with [Joan] Ankrum, which was the largest gallery in Los Angeles, and I think Southern California. It was Joseph Hirshhorn's gallery, sort of—he supported it. They asked me for my work. What I'm saying is, I have had little or no problem showing my work. Joan Ankrum is still a very good friend, and she still asks me to bring her work. She's closed the gallery, but she's still doing shows in New York and other places. There's a gallery where I show in New York, and I didn't ask them; I never ask anybody to show anything anyplace. It's like books; I never asked Harcourt [Brace, Jovanovich] to publish my book.

SMITH: Oh, they came to you? But you knew the need.





LEWIS: I knew the need. I was teaching my students from lectures that I was writing, and somehow they found out that this was going on. I guess I gave a few lectures, here and there. I think Mary Jane Hewitt might have mentioned my name to them. And I think John did, John Outterbridge. I was at Scripps minding my business, doing my work, and a man came from Santa Barbara and asked me to do a book for Harcourt.

SMITH: Well, why not?

LEWIS: That's what I said, why not? [laughter] So what I'm saying is, I have the idea that you can do what you want to do, as long as you're really serious about it, and as long as you have some idea of where you want to go, I think you can make it a legitimate effort and you don't have to work according to what other people want you to do. Just do well in whatever you do. I'm not saying that that's a measure for success, but you have to not worry about certain things, like being in galleries or getting publishers. Just worry about doing it.

SMITH: This one is clearly a portrait of somebody in particular, not somebody in general.

LEWIS: No, it's a portrait of the white lady.

SMITH: Oh, Mrs. Roane.

LEWIS: No, just any white lady. [laughter]

SMITH: Oh, okay.



LEWIS: In this region—that was done at the same period—this is the way the white ladies looked.

SMITH: Okay.

LEWIS: You don't see any pain there, hardly. I'm sure there was *some* pain that they were suffering, because I know Mrs. Roane felt so guilty about certain things that she funded the art program for the black schools while I was there. She felt really guilty, but I don't think it caused her too much pain. She bought her way out of it. So that's what that is. I had no model for that.

SMITH: No model. And, again, this person is another type in the area.

LEWIS: Yes, that's another type. That's the fear in the region, more than a person.

SMITH: Okay. So the portraits are portraits of basic emotional states.

LEWIS: That's right, absolutely. And these are not people that I saw, but these are ideas that stem from the maintenance of racism. You see, the little boy is being pulled away from those people; they're not a lower class, they're just a different color.

They're sort of behind the barbed wire fence there. These three women are there talking, the little boy is curious, and that hand is on him to say, "No, don't you go over there, don't you think about that." I did a lot of ink paintings or drawings, whatever you want to call it, at that time, and I am surprised at how I could do that. I don't think I could do that now.

SMITH: Ink drawings?



LEWIS: Yeah, they are so spontaneous. I have examined them, and I don't see too much of anything that I would have changed. I guess you have to have those kinds of convictions, and I couldn't do that here. I could do it there. Because you are motivated and stimulated by the environment. If I would do it here I would have to do something else, of course, but I'm not sure that that facility that I had with handling ink is still with me. You cannot just say, "I'm going to sit down and do this."

SMITH: When you were studying Chinese art, did you practice those techniques?

LEWIS: Oh, yes I did, but this I did before that.

SMITH: When you were in Taiwan, did you do any artwork there of the scenes you were seeing?

LEWIS: No, none. I don't know if you saw the big abstract painting that's at Hampton, which I called *The Garden*; it has calligraphic strokes. That's the only thing that came out of Taiwan. Most of my Taiwan experience is probably yet to come, but it was more in history. But all of these were done before Taiwan.

SMITH: This is a clay sculpture.

LEWIS: That was at Hampton and I think I threw it out.

SMITH: Here's a drawing you did in high school. Is it a picture of someone in particular?

LEWIS: Yes, it's a portrait. We used to have quick sketches; that's about a twenty-minute sketch.





SMITH: So this was a friend?

LEWIS: No, it's just a fellow who was in my class. He then went on to Dillard to study art with Elizabeth, but he didn't do too much.

SMITH: These are all dated: '41, '42.

LEWIS: High school. This is my sister Gertrude. That's one of the pastel paintings that I did with Galli.

SMITH: Is this one a pen drawing?

LEWIS: No, that's lithographic crayon on paper. Usually they tend to have a tacky kind of surface. There's one in here I want you to see. You probably saw it at Hampton. Not those. They're some things that came later.

SMITH: This one from '67 is quite nice.

LEWIS: Yeah, it's on raw canvas. It was for a friend of mine. We got our kids involved in Unitarian fellowships and things like that, because I didn't want them to go to Catholic schools or churches and Paul didn't want them in Christian Science, so we had to find something else, and we chose Unitarian, which we thought would give them a broader choice of—

SMITH: But you did think it was important that they go to church?

LEWIS: Well, it's not church, it's fellowship. I thought it was important for them to have some sort of experience, some discipline that might help to condition their lives in a spiritual sense, and Unitarianism had to do with poetry and a lot of experiences



like that, you know. It was more to my liking that they maintain open minds so that when they reached a stage of choice that they could make their own decisions. You can see what happened: one's a Rastafarian and the older boy is Jewish; he is a practicing Jew.

SMITH: He converted to Judaism?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: Oh, we'll have to talk about that.

LEWIS: Before that, I sent him to India; he wanted to go to India to study. He did Sanskrit at Dartmouth, but now he's a conservative Jew.

SMITH: What led him to decide on Judaism?

LEWIS: I asked him that, and he said he liked the discipline of it, he likes the challenge, and he likes the religion. But I guess it wasn't too difficult, because he was dealing with a kind of Buddhism; he went through a lot of things, the Chinese language, Chinese religions—

SMITH: Following in your footsteps in a way.

LEWIS: Not really.

SMITH: No, okay.

LEWIS: He was a violinist; he was at Oberlin [College] and he didn't like it and he came back after two months and then went on to Dartmouth. He went to Verde Valley School in Sedona, a high school, and I think it started there. It's a marvelous



school for humanities, and he was able to travel to Europe and to different places during the summer. He went to Spain. He had his own experiences, being near the rocks in Sedona and all of those things. He was with the Apaches for a while and saw ceremonial kinds of things.

SMITH: Did Claude go to Jamaica?

LEWIS: No, he went to Pitzer [College], then he went to California College of Arts of Crafts, and that's where he began to be a Rastafarian. He has never traveled to Jamaica.

SMITH: So he's an artist as well?

LEWIS: Well, he's a photographer. He did California College of Arts and Crafts and did photography there. He was glad to get out of Pitzer, and he enjoyed Oakland. But both of them have stuck to their chosen directions; it's not one of these things where they've moved in and out. Claude has been doing photography for I think fifteen years, something like that.

SMITH: Does he work as a photographer?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: And your other son?

LEWIS: Alan is an administrator in the [San Fernando] Valley, in the public schools. He studied linguistics, but he didn't want to do philosophical linguistics. He was working on a Ph.D. at Stanford and decided that he wanted to work with children, so





he took his master's and went into English as a second language and started teaching on the elementary level, and now he's an administrator in the public school system and working on a Ph.D. at the University of Southern California.

SMITH: How many grandchildren do you have?

LEWIS: Three.

SMITH: Three. That's nice.

LEWIS: Yes. They are really interesting, too. One graduates from high school in June, next month, and she's going to [California State University] Northridge. She doesn't want to leave her Mom, but she's going to stay in the dormitory. Her Mom is Alan's first wife, and she's really a nice person. She's a little scatterbrained, but she's dependable, and nice. She's done a great job with the kids. The boy lives with Alan now, but the girl's still with her mother.

[referring to another photograph of a drawing:] That's the face of Africa. It's a drawing, a soft pencil drawing. Mixed with a few other things I think, maybe charcoal and ink.

SMITH: This is from the seventies?

LEWIS: I think so, the seventies.

SMITH: I'm just trying to fit it with the other stuff I've seen.

LEWIS: I was going to Africa at that point.

SMITH: Was this for the FESTAC [African Festival of Arts and Culture]?



LEWIS: I was going for the FESTAC in '77, but I went before then, about '74. And I could see why the face of Africa was still white. Anything that meant anything there was controlled by Europeans, not necessarily Americans in the United States, but by Europeans. Still by the British, still by the French. The whole environment was black, but the real face—

SMITH: So this is like Fanon.

LEWIS: That's right. Without intending to be. This is just what I saw and what I felt.

SMITH: When was the first time you went to Africa?

LEWIS: I went to Kenya many, many years ago, when I went to Taiwan on that Fulbright. I didn't stay long, but we had a choice of going anywhere else for a very small amount of money, I can't remember what it was, and I decided I wanted to go to Africa. So I went to Kenya with a friend of mine who lives in Florida now. We just sort of vacationed for about two weeks in Kenya.

SMITH: It wasn't yet independent then?

LEWIS: No. But that was interesting because when we were in upstate New York, [Jomo] Kenyatta's close relatives lived with us. Harry Belafonte brought a plane load of Africans in, and some were from South Africa, some from East Africa, and about fifteen of them ended up on our campus in upstate New York. So I knew something about Kenya, what little I could learn in two weeks. I maintained some contact with



my friend; she worked at the college that Frank Lloyd Wright designed in Florida, I'm trying to think of the name. You know which one I'm talking about, generally?

SMITH: Yes.

LEWIS: Well, she was there, and we were together on our Fulbrights. So that was my first time in Africa. But my first time for any real study in Africa was in the seventies.

SMITH: You said yesterday that Nigeria was important.

LEWIS: Nigeria was important, but I also spent a lot of time in Senegal, and I worked at the Senghor Center. It was an historical center in Dakar, and some of the places I went as a result of being with that center, some of the people in the center had never been. They had never seen some of the things back in the bush—they were intellectuals from the Paris universities.

I have slides and things from those experiences. I have slides all over the place. That's something that I'm having problems with, and I have many, many books on Africa, and books on Chinese art. I would like to find some black institution to give them to. I can give away the books on Africa, but they don't want the Chinese art books. I can't give them to the public schools, and the libraries, because they can't accept those books because they haven't been through their screening committees. So I'm looking at some private institutions that might accept these things. There's a Watts labor group here that I'm working with that I think will take them. It's not





easy.

SMITH: No, it's not.

LEWIS: [referring to a photo of another artwork:] This is when I began to think about masks, and at one point I was using the mask to convert to contemporary African American forms. I was trying to see where different types of people might have originated from in terms of their heritage, their ancestry. I don't know why I thought it was important to do all those silly things, but—

SMITH: Because people get so mixed up here.

LEWIS: I know, I know, but there are some who are not so mixed up, and you can get a sense that this person must have been from this part of the world, from the Sudan.

SMITH: Right. This one was in the show.

LEWIS: Yes, it was in the show at Hampton. It's a pencil drawing, and it has the Shango headdress, that evolves from a pillbox hat, with the *semfo* legs—you see those little suggested things?

SMITH: Spider legs, then.

LEWIS: Right.

SMITH: Does this reflect a particular part of Africa, or is it a synthesis?

LEWIS: No, it's a synthesis. It's the continuation of the African concept; that's a Shango staff, so I call her *Sister Shango*; she's from one of these churches, and she's



been dipping snuff.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

LEWIS: That may be too literal for some people, but I'm putting it together, sort of.

SMITH: And this one is from '88.

LEWIS: That's Brazil. That's an expressive kind of thing. Ink. I began to get a little more minimal.

SMITH: That is a figure, I would assume.

LEWIS: Oh yes, it is.

SMITH: Was this done from a model?

LEWIS: No. In Plattsburgh there was a male model I used one time. But that was it. There's one we haven't seen that I want you to see. It's the back and front of a piece of sculpture.

SMITH: Maybe it's in the folder.

LEWIS: It really should be in one of these [folders] . . . oh, here it is. This is one that I did at Hampton.

SMITH: A mother with two children.

LEWIS: And there's another one that I did that won a sculpture prize in Atlanta. Here it is.

SMITH: Do you still do sculpture?

LEWIS: I'm starting back. I have my sculpture upstairs.



SMITH: But you stopped for a while.

LEWIS: It's difficult to travel and to move around and do sculpture. I can do prints, I can start a painting and come back, but it's not easy to do sculpture. And it's expensive to do sculpture too, much more expensive.

SMITH: That is a factor, yes.

LEWIS: I have a lot of wood now, so I am working. This is a little piece I brought back from Barbados, I think it was, that little piece on the floor there. I'm going to begin just making something out of it, but I have to feel it first to see what's in there.

SMITH: Did you have any classes with Joseph Gilliard?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. Ceramics. Not sculpture, but ceramics. When I was there he was diving into the Hampton roads trying to create a different type of glaze that was based on fish scales, or the residue of fish in the Hampton roads. I think he went to Alfred as a student. He was really excited about glazes and I think at that time his major professor was a glaze person, or emphasized glazes. But Gilliard was a very good teacher. I collect ceramics too. Every time Paul Soldner would go on leave from Scripps they would bring in a ceramics person to substitute for him, and I would buy from Paul's replacement. I got some beautiful things.

SMITH: That's a gorgeous piece.

LEWIS: Yes. And I got some pieces from a Japanese monk, in the living room. I purchased two or three pieces from this lady; one is a mirror with elephant ears.





SMITH: What's her name?

LEWIS: It's on the bottom, I think. But she's very famous now. I should be looking it up and saying, "I've got a piece by her," but I don't do that. But I see her shows reviewed now in *Art News*.

SMITH: Well, maybe to go back to the mundane: you started teaching at Morgan State University in '48. How did you get that job?

LEWIS: It must have been later than '48. I don't know how I got the job, but I know I was sort of sent there by Ohio State with the understanding that I needed more experience. Now, when I was getting my Ph.D. I think there was an age preference or something. They preferred that you be at least 26, or something, I don't know what it was. But they said they thought I needed another year of seasoning. So I took a job at Morgan State.

SMITH: Had you TA'd at Ohio State?

LEWIS: Yes, I had, in sculpture. And it wasn't a happy experience for me.

SMITH: Oh. A conflict of perspectives?

LEWIS: Yeah, perspectives. It had nothing to do with the teaching, really. It had to do with sexism. The professor felt that women shouldn't use welding tools. We were moving into a more contemporary kind of style during that time, and he wanted women to work with only the modeling techniques. So that's what he advocated, and I disagreed of course. So we didn't do too well. After a year with him I decided that



that was not what I wanted to do.

SMITH: Who was this person?

LEWIS: I can't think of his name now. I can see him, but I will remember his name.

SMITH: What did the other women students feel about this?

LEWIS: Well, they felt that he was wrong. So that was that whole sexism issue coming into play. I worked with Hoyt Sherman, Roy Lichtenstein's favorite person at Ohio State. He was a good teacher, but I guess I couldn't adjust to him too well because I vaguely remember that he might have made some racist remarks. He was from Atlanta, I remember that. And there was something about him that made me keep my distance. And I'm sure it had to do with his upbringing.

SMITH: But you were able to deal with that with Grimes.

LEWIS: When Grimes made his remarks that tended to be racist, he put it more in the form of a joke. It was not a real serious remark. And he knew that it was wrong, and he didn't put things in a way where he had to apologize, because he was saying, "Don't take me seriously." But the others were serious. There's something that Hoyt did. Paul might remember; he remembers those things more than I do. But it was kind of a racist thing.

SMITH: So, you were at Morgan State University. You were teaching studio art, and art appreciation, or art history?

LEWIS: I think I taught only studio art class at Morgan State. There were two of us



there, and I might have taught art appreciation, but I don't think they had any art history at that time. But I did teach studio art. That's most vivid in my mind.

SMITH: How big were your classes?

LEWIS: I would say they were about fifteen, twenty students.

SMITH: And you would teach drawing, painting?

LEWIS: Drawing and painting.

SMITH: Printmaking?

LEWIS: Printmaking. I had more than one class of course, and I'm sure I taught printmaking, drawing, and painting. I really don't know how I got the job. I don't know whether somebody recommended me, or I saw it advertised, or somebody knew about it, I really don't remember. But it couldn't have been '48, I don't think. I'll have to look it up. Because I got my Ph.D. and went back to Morgan in '51 and I must have had a brief stay there in '49, and then got my Ph.D. in '51 and then in the fall of '51 I went back; that's what it was.

SMITH: How did Morgan compare to Dillard or Hampton as a school?

LEWIS: Well, number one it was a state school, and it didn't compare to Dillard or Hampton academically at that point. They probably have moved up the ladder since. It was a good school, but it was not on a par with Dillard or Hampton.

[Tape VI, Side One]

LEWIS: Morgan State University could admit people who would not have been





admitted to Hampton or Dillard, which were private schools. Baltimore was interesting, but Morgan was probably the beginning of real challenges for me. I did a lot of art there and I met Mrs. Adele Briskin. She was a curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and she went to San Francisco after that to be a curator at the museum there. Then I knew about the Cone Collection there, the two sisters, you know. There's a big controversy about that collection now, because I guess the Baltimore Museum cared for it so many years and they built a special wing, and now the family wants it back, or something like that. But that was really interesting for me to be near the Baltimore Museum, and at least being able to communicate with the people at the museum.

But Morgan State was a very disappointing kind of experience for me. We're talking about the early fifties, and somehow, with my progressive spirit, I had heard about the terrible treatment given to the prisoners, especially the black prisoners—of course they didn't have integrated prisons, even—in the Maryland state penitentiary. I decided I was going to go out and teach a class in drawing and painting. I didn't just think of this myself, there must have been some offer from someplace, where somebody said they needed people to come out and do certain things. It probably came from the churches, or the NAACP, I don't know. But I decided I'd go. So I went out to teach, and not too long after my first visit some of my students decided they wanted to go out and help. These were grown students who didn't even live on



campus. They were not young students. But the college found out about it and decided that it was not something that they wanted any of us to do, it was out of keeping with being a professor, certainly, and they just didn't want to be associated at all with the prison system in Maryland. So I was called in and told I couldn't do that. Here we go again, you see. Even though it did not interfere with my work—

SMITH: So it wasn't just that the students couldn't go, you couldn't go.

LEWIS: I couldn't go either. And I guess when I refused to obey again, I became an enemy.

SMITH: Now, this is during the McCarthy period.

LEWIS: It gets nasty, it gets so: "disloyal to the United States government, and to the state of Maryland." And it went to a point where I had to get a lawyer, because they had my records so padded that you would have thought I was a *real enemy*. I didn't know about this until one of my friends who was close to the administration told me, "You'd better see about getting your records straightened out, because they have you as disloyal to the government of the United States, the state of Maryland, an alcoholic, and all kinds of things," you see. I was so depressed I didn't know what to do. Here I am, feeling innocent of all of this, and not knowing what to do.

They brought in somebody who helped them to document this. They wanted me to help get rid of the man who was already there, and I refused to do that. And then, since I refused to do that and I kept doing what I was doing, the administration



decided they would get rid of both of us, so they brought in another person to make our records look as though we were disloyal people. The lawyer I got was the same lawyer who worked in North Carolina for the textile workers. I don't know his name now but he was the lawyer who helped to unionize the textile workers. I didn't know him, but my friend, who later was appointed to some post in Washington, knew him. Here's another situation: I didn't have any money, because they paid you something like \$2000 a year; it was just nothing, but the guy took my case for two paintings. He just handled the whole situation and made them clean up my record. He took them over the coals, so to speak; he was a very powerful man, and a good lawyer. So I left there when I wanted to leave, but I went to an even worse place, Florida A. & M.

SMITH: Were there other faculty at Morgan that were facing similar problems or that you became close with as this developed?

LEWIS: There were a few, but they were not facing similar problems. They were other faculty members who befriended me, but they were not facing the same problems because they didn't go to the Maryland state prison. That was my problem. If I had behaved and had tried to help them get rid of the person who was there—I'm still trying to think of his name [Charles Stallings]—then I would have been okay.

SMITH: Now, you have been using this word "behave." Do you think this would have happened if you were at a white school? Is this something that was particular to the black colleges at the time, a sort of consciousness?





LEWIS: I think the administration at a white school would have been too busy doing other things rather than to worry about my going to a state prison. I don't think it would have happened, I really don't. Not that a white school is better, but I think administrations in black schools tend to not allow the control to be out of their hands. It's almost like being in Africa; you can't leave the country without being overthrown, you know? They hold very close their administrative duties and they seem to exceed what they should be doing, and it becomes a very personal thing. No, I don't think it would have happened in even the worst of the white schools. But I wouldn't have been at the white schools anyway. I was offered a job at Ohio State, I could have stayed there, but my idea was, no, I'm getting this education, so I should give back to my community.

I thought that everybody would want to help the young black prisoners. Not to help them escape or anything, but to help them get their minds focused on something that could help them go through this period of incarceration. But I guess I was wrong. People tend to be middle class and to be class-conscious without realizing that that's what's happening to them. I think many people at that time who were going to colleges, especially black students, put themselves in a different category; there wasn't this spirit of working together. I don't think that happened until Martin Luther King came along. Some of them worked with Martin Luther King [in the fifties], and some of them worked in the sixties because they were afraid



of being ostracized by their own people, not so much that they wanted to lift up or help anybody. I don't know why I thought it was important to do this. Nobody pulled me aside and said, "This is the way you are supposed to do it." I don't know why or how or where it came from, but I knew that I was supposed to do something. I did what I thought I could do best, and it certainly was harmless.

But when I went to Florida it was even worse. It was worse. I was invited to go to Florida by the people who had been my friends at Dillard. Randolph Edmunds decided that Florida would be a good place for me. I wasn't necessarily running away from Morgan, because the fight was over. I hadn't won anything, but at least I could stay there in peace after this lawyer straightened them out. But when I went to Florida A. & M. I was really going to be with Randolph and his wife, and he was one of my good teachers from Dillard, and I thought it was wonderful. But when I got there I found out that that place was under the control of the state legislature and it was terrible. It was a terrible place; it was the only state college in the whole state of Florida.

SMITH: For blacks.

LEWIS: For blacks. Florida State [University] was also there, up the hill, but blacks couldn't go to Florida State. I had a lot of friends at Florida State, in the art department and the anthropology department, and they were very close, very good friends. I didn't know them from Ohio State or any other place, I knew them from



Tallahassee, which is the place where I was investigated, I mean *really* investigated, by the state legislature, because I belonged to the NAACP and I was a follower of Martin Luther King.

Grimes came down to give a lecture at the university, and he was arrested for associating with me. He was. I kept telling him, "These people are watching us. These people are watching *you*." And he said, "Oh Samella, you've got a chip on your shoulder, you just don't know what you're talking about." They put him in jail. They arrested him on his way out. We paid him to come down. He had a check, and when he wanted to cash the check he needed somebody with him to verify that this was a legitimate check, because he didn't have a bank account there. So we went to the bank where the university had an account, and as the faculty member who had invited him, I had all the papers. I was in the front seat with him and Claude was in the back seat, and after he drove the two of us back, they arrested him for fraternizing with me. It was illegal for a black woman and a white man to be in the same seat together. And Claude must have been our son. They arrested the man.

Then not too long after that they served me with a subpoena. First they tried to serve it on Paul, but they couldn't serve it on either one of us, because we avoided them. They finally served me with a subpoena because the president asked me to come to his office for a conference.

SMITH: Oh, so he was in on it.





LEWIS: Oh, yes. He had the police behind his door, and when I extended my hand to shake his hand, the police put the subpoena in my hand.

SMITH: And what were you subpoenaed for?

LEWIS: I was investigated for being subversive. I don't know to whom or what.

SMITH: White power.

LEWIS: Before that, the KKK had paraded in front of our house, on the side. We had one of these nice houses near the golf course. It had a lot of glass, and they shot the windows out from their cars, and all kinds of silly things, you know.

SMITH: That doesn't sound so silly. It sounds frightening.

LEWIS: I know, but—

SMITH: The civil rights movement had gotten going. Were you involved?

LEWIS: I was involved in the bus boycott.

SMITH: In Tallahassee?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: Is this following Montgomery, then?

LEWIS: Right. There was a bus boycott, and we used to carry people to their work, so they wouldn't have to ride the bus. I was one of fifteen, and Paul was the bookkeeper for the organization of ministers and other people.

SMITH: Was this the SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], or was it a local group?



LEWIS: No, it was a local group. Metz Rollins was a black Presbyterian minister, and the presbytery was going to build a black Presbyterian church. When he became involved in the civil rights movement there, he said human dignity and human rights were more important than religion if the religion didn't foster human rights, so the Presbyterian church wouldn't allow him to attend meetings of the presbytery in that region. He had to go all the way to Alabama or someplace else to the presbytery. His grandfather and his father were both Presbyterian ministers in North Carolina, but they refused to build his church after he made that statement, and then refused to allow him to pastor any of their churches for ten years after that. He had to go to White Plains, New York, and get a church someplace in that region. It was about fifteen years later that he was able to get a church. But we became Presbyterians then, so he could have a flock. [laughter]

At that time I was granted a Ford Foundation to go to Ethiopia to do some research on the hill people and their pottery, and the board of trustees of Florida A. & M., which was all white and all male, had told the president not to grant me any favors or anything. Ford doesn't give grants unless you can show that you are not creating a hardship for your university, so they told the Ford Foundation people that my leaving would create a hardship for them, so they rescinded the grant.

SMITH: Of course you would think they would want to get rid of you for a year

LEWIS: No, they wanted to punish me; they wanted to block every thing. I was



there for five years, mind you, and the troubles started from the very beginning. I wanted to get out because of our children. Claude was born in Tallahassee, so he was very young, but Alan was beginning to hate, and I could see that all this was going to really reflect on them and they were going to think that all white people were demons or something.

So I wrote to Lowenfeld and said, "I've got to get out of here." He said he couldn't come down because he had a heart condition, and if he could come down, he wouldn't know what he'd do. But he told me there was a man up in upstate New York, in Plattsburgh, who was a student of his. He was head of the art department, and he needed someone to work with him. So I wrote to him, and when I went up for my interview I went up during a period when they were having commencement exercises and I got the job without their knowing I had gone anyplace. Because they would have told the people in Plattsburgh I was a communist or something. But before I left there I had contact with a lot of interesting people. I met Cannonball Adderley, and Nat was in my class.

SMITH: Nat Adderley.

LEWIS: Yes. My student relationships were very good.

SMITH: Now, you came there as chair of the department?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: You were engulfed in all this political stuff, but you must have at least





started out with some goals about what you wanted that department to do.

LEWIS: Oh yes, yes. Number one, I wanted to build up the department. When I got there, there was a yearly budget of \$400. The students had nothing, and they were good students, very good students. I didn't use Hampton as a model, or Morgan, I used Ohio State, where they had more opportunities. I wanted a good printmaking setup, because I knew that was very vital to black students at that time in terms of being able to express themselves and do it quickly enough so that they could get a sense of having accomplished something. Then I wanted to do ceramics and sculpture, the hands-on kind of thing, where they could model and mold.

There was a man from Haiti, Maribeau, who taught ceramics and sculpture, and he was a great ceramist. He was already there, I found him there. I wanted painting, drawing and printmaking; drawing and printmaking were together. We didn't have too many people, so I had to combine certain things. My idea was to build all this up. I had to raise money for the department, but I couldn't raise money outside and bring it into a state situation. It had to come from the state.

SMITH: So, from the state legislature, down the street.

LEWIS: Yes. It had to go through the president. That's what I was saying, about the administrations of these schools. I had to become a little more political, so I proceeded to paint the president's portrait. The budget immediately jumped to about a thousand dollars, you see. I was also nice to the president's wife. I did the things



that I was supposed to do. Nobody told me I was supposed to do these things, I just sensed that this was the way I had to do it if I was concerned about my students and I wanted them to have this, that or the other thing. You do certain things when you are the chair of a department. So I did those things that I thought would bring more income for the department, and it worked. The president's wife liked me. It wasn't until the bus boycott that things got really rough.

SMITH: Did you also want to have an art history program?

LEWIS: Yes, and I did have an art history program.

SMITH: So you started teaching art history.

LEWIS: Right, and that's why I brought people like Grimes down, and I brought Hale Woodruff in.

SMITH: Now, in a situation like that, were you doing the entire world? I mean, did somebody teach European art, and somebody else teach African art?

LEWIS: I had another person who came from Ohio State. His name is Howard Lewis. He's still there. He had studied art history, and the two of us, the two Lewises did the art history. We didn't do so much Renaissance and baroque, but we did more contemporary, and we did what people generally call non-Western.

SMITH: And American art history?

LEWIS: We did contemporary American art history: Jackson Pollock and Kline, people like that.



SMITH: What about with African American painters and sculptors, did you give a historical overview there?

LEWIS: Yes, that's right. And we started what they called the NCA, the National Conference of Artists at Florida A. & M. They have it starting in Atlanta two years later, but we started it at Florida A. & M. We brought in James Porter from Howard, and we brought in Hale Woodruff from NYU. We had big conferences at least once a year dealing with African American artists, and we had people coming to lecture during both semesters. I forgot to mention also that we used the Cedric Dover book [*American Negro Art*], with Barthé's *The Negro Looks Ahead* on the cover. And we used some of Alain Locke's writings. Locke was my commencement speaker at Hampton, so I knew about him, and I knew how to get in touch with him.

SMITH: It sounds like you did a lot. Was the university well funded, considering?

LEWIS: The university was well funded, but not the art department. I had to build up some consciousness. I think the president, when all of this happened, was very sad about it, and by the way he was from Tennessee, and his name was Gore.

SMITH: Oh? [laughter]

LEWIS: There's a whole black Gore family in Tennessee.

SMITH: I didn't know that.

LEWIS: One of them was president of Tennessee State, and this other one was president of Florida A. & M. There was a tendency to make your offsprings





presidents of colleges. They were all definitely from the union of black and white families.

SMITH: That's interesting.

LEWIS: George W. Gore. The Gores were very important in Nashville.

SMITH: So they were an established Southern black family.

LEWIS: Yeah, an aristocratic family.

SMITH: So he could deal with the white power elite, if not on an equal basis, at least on some kind of basis where they would feel comfortable with him.

LEWIS: Right, because they felt that light-skinned Negroes were better, and more intelligent than dark-skinned Negroes, and he was very light skinned. You look like some of this is amazing you and shocking you.

SMITH: No . . . you know this happens, but—

LEWIS: But it is a lot to happen in one life, where you go through all this stuff.

SMITH: Did you want to have a museum program?

LEWIS: Yes, I did. I wanted to have a gallery program, which I did start. And I did carry on to some extent the mural programs that I got from Lowenfeld. I'm in touch with about ten of my students now who were there. The Adderley story is a real interesting one, because Lionel Hampton came through and wanted Nat in his senior year to go to Europe with him. Nat was in my class, and he's from a family of teachers, so they wanted him to graduate of course, but he wanted to go to Europe. I



think he was in his last semester, so I went around to all the teachers and said, "I know he's not the greatest student, but he's at least a C student, so why don't you just think about it and give him whatever you can give him that will be a passing grade and let him go." And they did. It was about one month before graduation. The only teacher that almost refused to do it was the biology teacher, and she was a good friend. She would have failed her mother if her mother needed it, but she came through. So he got his degree, and he was able to go to Europe and play with Lionel Hampton, and it was the best thing for him.

SMITH: He is a great musician.

LEWIS: A great musician, yeah. And his son is a marvelous musician, too. The family lived right around the corner from us. So that was one of my Florida A. & M. stories.

SMITH: What was Tallahassee like as a place to live, before the bus boycott?

LEWIS: I was there I guess one year before the bus boycott happened. It was a nice place to live. We built a house.

SMITH: So Paul was teaching high school, or community college?

LEWIS: No, Paul was working at the university. He was in accounting; that's where his accounting started. He studied accounting at Ohio State also—engineering, and then he went into accounting. He graduated in accounting.

SMITH: Had he ever lived in the South before? I guess Baltimore—



LEWIS: No, he didn't live in Baltimore. He was still a student at Ohio State University, and he would make occasional trips to Baltimore. He had never lived in the South. Of course Gary, Indiana, was like the South; it's the home of the Ku Klux Klan, isn't it?

SMITH: Yes.

LEWIS: But he didn't really live there, he was just born there. He had never lived in the South, but Cleveland wasn't that great a place when he was growing up. He knew about all of those things because his father, as I said, was involved in political activities.

SMITH: It sounds like both of you were equally committed and active.

LEWIS: Paul even took a job at White Face Inn to expose the slavery that was going on there.

SMITH: White Face Inn? I don't know that.

LEWIS: The White Face Inn, in upstate New York, where the ski resort is.

SMITH: Oh, I see, in Plattsburgh.

LEWIS: So he was more committed than I was, in a way. He became the book-keeper for the bus protest. I did a card for the bus boycott people to raise money, and that got me into a difficulty, too. It said, "Peace on Earth, Good Will to *all* Men." If I had been astute I would have said, "All Men and Women," but I didn't say it. When I think back, I think, "I should have said women too." But in the center was a





Caucasian woman—they were all women, I didn't have any men there—and there was an Asian woman to the left, and on the right was an African woman. They questioned me in the legislature about this card and why I made it. They wanted to know what I meant by "all." I had underlined it. It was ridiculous, so silly. Not silly . . . it was *painful* at the time, to have to do this kind of thing. The governor was even there, wasting his time. And when they finished questioning me, I couldn't stay there, I had to leave, and nobody could talk to me. So we weren't very popular on the campus because we were considered as sort of dangerous people to be around.

There was another confrontation I had with the police downtown. You know how you sometimes get caught in an intersection? A little bit of my car was in the intersection, and I couldn't move forward because there was somebody parking. The police came and Alan was in the car, and the policeman called us niggers, or something like that, and I immediately took his badge number. I wrote a letter to the newspaper, and it was published.

SMITH: The major daily newspaper in Tallahassee?

LEWIS: Yes. It was a pretty open newspaper. It wasn't a racist, racist newspaper. It was as open as it could be. The Lewis State Bank people were the ones who had Frank Lloyd Wright come down and design their house in the woods. There were some really good people there. But the fact that it was published didn't help my case, because I was talking about United States citizens being harassed. I had to do the



same thing at Claremont, by the way.

SMITH: The same thing?

LEWIS: I had to write a letter.

SMITH: To the Claremont newspaper, because of police harassment?

LEWIS: To the mayor. They didn't want to think that Claude lived in the neighborhood that we lived in, so the police were following him. He didn't even have dreadlocks then. They were following him because he was black.

SMITH: He was a teenager?

LEWIS: He was a teenager, yes, and they didn't want to think he lived in the neighborhood. They searched him and made him do the spread, and all of this. It happened right in front of his house. He said, "Just come in the house." And they wouldn't. So I had to write a letter to the mayor.

SMITH: Did you get any satisfaction from that?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. They reprimanded the policeman. They didn't fire him, but I didn't ask that they fire him. So anyway, what I am saying is, it wasn't just Florida. We left Tallahassee to go to Plattsburgh, and when we got to Georgia, Alan said, "I'm glad we're out of that place." So he had been feeling it, you know.

SMITH: But of course that had to be part and parcel of the civil rights struggle.

LEWIS: Oh, yes, absolutely. I had neighbor friends where they had to take people out in hearses. My friend had a funeral parlor, and when people would go someplace



to speak she would have to put them in coffins and take them out in a hearse to keep them from being lynched. People don't realize how dreadful it was. Most young black people, or even middle-aged, don't realize how dreadful it was. People say, "You have to laugh at yourself," but I can't laugh at those things, I can't laugh at myself. I can't see all of those minstrel kinds of things that people are saying is great art. It isn't just minstrel, it's the buffoon-looking things, and they're saying, "This is the new art. You've got to laugh at yourself." And some of the people calling themselves "nigger bitches" and things like that. I can't respond positively to this. It's their right to do it, I know, but I think if they knew the context and the history behind it, they wouldn't.

SMITH: Are you referring to the woman from Georgia who's having a show in San Francisco?

LEWIS: Kara Walker, and a few others, including Michael Ray Charles. I know [Kara's] father really well. He was at the University of the Pacific. There are a lot of people out there doing this type of art. It's something that this guy here is funding heavily— Peter Norton. [In] the *Black Male* show, you have this black guy with the coat on and hat and all dressed, with his penis sticking out. I mean, that's a statement there. And I understand that over at the Los Angeles County Museum last week they had a performance by the curators, where one of them was imitating Dennis Rodman. He had a wig on, and then another person had a knife, ready to cut his penis off. This





was over at the county museum. Jackie Avant just told me this yesterday. They were so-called "giving a play" for the docents, and having fun, a party.

SMITH: It sounds like minstrel show.

LEWIS: Yes. I mean, that's vicious, you know? This is the very place, and these are the very people to whom we offered thirty-six Norman Lewises, and they couldn't find one that they wanted. They didn't even have to pay for it. Joan Palevsky was willing to buy it for them. She wants to buy either African American art or Mexican American art, because she said they don't have any over there. They have about seven pieces of African American art, and one of those artists is not an African American. [Robert] Gwathmey is a white man. It's fine, he worked with African Americans, but he's not African American. They think because he did black subject matter that he has to be African American. I've told them for the past twenty years that this man was not African American. He just died about two years ago. He's from a wealthy white Virginia family. But, can you imagine? I expressed my distaste for this and I told them I am going to send a letter to the *LA Times* if they don't do something to reconsider their actions and apologize for some of this. Now, the *LA Times* might not print it, but I will send it.

SMITH: The civil rights movement, after '55, becomes a mass movement. It had actually been going on for years, but as it becomes a mass movement and King and others begin to redefine it from less of a legal struggle to more of a non-violent civil



disobedience, weren't there plenty of people at Florida A. & M. who were in support of what was happening?

LEWIS: No, not at the university. There were fifteen of us. And I know there were fifteen of us because we all left at the same time. And they had about two hundred faculty and staff members when I was there, at least two hundred. Only fifteen of us were active. There were some community people, some of the black ministers.

[Tape VI, Side Two]

LEWIS: When I was in Florida, they asked about signing the loyalty oath, and I said, to whom? They said, "To the government of the United States and the state of Florida." I said, "They are not in agreement. I can't sign one paper that includes both the government of the United States and the state of Florida, because I don't believe in discrimination and segregation. According to the Constitution and the Bill of Rights and so forth, I'm not supposed to sign papers that would foster this. With your segregation laws on the books, I can't sign that." We would stand in line for a long, long time, to vote. I knew there were a lot of people who were doing that. My mother was doing it . . . old people, young people, anybody who could vote.

SMITH: So did you vote in the fifties in Florida?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. The ministers led that, you know. We voted for anybody, we even voted for Eisenhower, we didn't care. [laughter] Just vote. We didn't have much choice, but we voted, yes.



SMITH: Now, is that because Florida's laws were not as strict as, say, Mississippi's?

LEWIS: Well, Mississippi probably had laws that allowed you to vote, but the local situations prevented you from voting. I think that overall, federal laws would allow you to vote, but not the state laws.

SMITH: So you would pay the poll tax, or whatever they had in Florida?

LEWIS: I don't know whether they had that.

SMITH: Or the literacy test?

LEWIS: No, we didn't have to do that. I think we might have paid the poll tax, but we had no literacy test, no.

SMITH: Were you concerned about issues like atomic war, the cold war, and where the world was headed—you know, nuclear disarmament?

LEWIS: I was concerned about issues of atomic war when Truman dropped the atomic bomb on the Japanese. I wondered why they didn't do it to the Germans. That's what I wondered, but that was earlier; that was '45. That was my real concern. I didn't know much about Asia, but I did know about Germany, because I had been taught a lot of things about it in terms of history. In Plattsburgh, yes, because I was with the Unarians, as we called them, the Unitarians, and those issues always came up with them. They were the ones who had conferences and did things that would feed into this whole question of arms and the proliferation of weapons. We'd go to Montreal. Not in Florida though. No, we were too busy—





SMITH: The Bandung [Asian-African Conference] happened in 1955. Were you aware of that? Was that important to you?

LEWIS: No. I was still in Florida. I was in Florida until '58.

SMITH: What about when Ghana becomes independent, which I think is '56?

LEWIS: Oh, yeah. I knew somebody who went to that celebration. It was '56, you say?

SMITH: I think. Maybe it was '57.

LEWIS: I don't know when it was, but I was aware of that. World situations became more important to me when we moved to upstate New York and I was near Montreal. I knew about China then, because I was near a country where they never ceased relations with other places. I was eighteen miles from Montreal, where things were happening that you didn't hear too much about in this country. I think we became more world-conscious there than in Florida. It was very difficult in Florida, with what was going on there, to even think about the rest of the world. But somehow I knew about Ghana, and I knew people who went to the independence celebration, but I can't quite put it together now.

When we went to upstate New York, Africa became much more important to me, because we were near McGill [University], and we had chances to associate with the Queens scholars and people from east Africa, people who had escaped from South Africa to Tanzania, and so forth and so on. I also became a little more aware of the



Caribbean, even though I had only been to Haiti from Florida.

SMITH: Oh, you had been to Haiti?

LEWIS: Yes, but I hadn't dwelled on Caribbean culture that much.

SMITH: In the fifties, were you thinking of yourself primarily as an artist, or as an art historian-scholar?

LEWIS: Well, I had never thought of myself as a scholar. In the fifties I chose to think of myself as an art historian, because even though I painted and I did my drawings, I did that out of necessity in terms of my own development, to maintain some sense of balance; that's what my paintings and drawings have always meant to me. I've never sought to become a great artist. I guess I have moved more in the direction of historical pursuit. I wanted to major in history when I went to Dillard, and then it became art history. A lot of my interests have moved in the direction of art history because of my commitment to the visual arts. Maybe I am more in the sphere of the humanities. Maybe I am neither an art historian nor an artist, but somewhere in between. I am not a cultural historian, but I am where I think art history ought to be.



SESSION FOUR: 22 MAY, 1997

[Tape VII, Side One]

LEWIS: The other night, I called Sally Grimes, Dr. Grimes's daughter, because I'm working on her attempt to donate her father's collection to the African American museum in Detroit. Her mother was there, and I haven't talked to her in thirty years, and it was like things starting over again. Her mother is in a Quaker senior citizens home in Oberlin. I remembered that they were Quakers, or sort of bordering on being Quakers. She was also one of the Taft daughters, you remember.

SMITH: You had mentioned that, yeah.

LEWIS: She sounds so spry and eager, and she's apparently still singing and playing the piano and doing things. She has to be close to ninety. Okay, where are we now?

SMITH: Did you have anything you wanted to add from the last time?

LEWIS: I think I made one mistake. I said something about an exchange program we had with Vassar College.

SMITH: Right, yes.

LEWIS: I think it was Radcliffe. I always put the two of them together for some reason. But it was Radcliffe.

SMITH: Where we had left off, you had just decided that you had to leave Tallahassee and you got the job at Plattsburgh. I did want to ask you at this point if you were already beginning to collect in the forties and fifties.





LEWIS: Oh yes, I began collecting at Hampton, as a student. I was exchanging work with my fellow students. Especially John Biggers. I gave him works and he gave me works. Then Lowenfeld influenced us to collect prints, to try and surround ourselves with works that we liked, even if we could only pay ten dollars a quarter. So we began doing that, and when I went to Ohio State, Dr. Grimes had some influence on my collecting. I exchanged works with fellow classmates there, including Roy Lichtenstein. I don't know what he did with mine, but my mother threw his away.

SMITH: Oh no, that could have paid for your kids' college tuition.

LEWIS: I know it. My mother was cleaning out all these old things, and she didn't know. My first edition Lowenfeld books and things like this. She thought they were just old things, that she was tired of having around, and I wasn't there. But no, I started collecting at Hampton. That was a part of what Lowenfeld wanted us to do, and it was generally all African American art. I had Henry W. Bannarn sculptures. Some of it I couldn't keep, but a lot of it I did, and unfortunately when I took some of it home my mother didn't understand it. I did somehow manage to keep two of John Biggers's major drawings. And I collected some of Mr. Gilliard's ceramics. I had a nice collection by the time I got to Ohio State, and after arriving there I began collecting what you might call non-Western art, like Native American art. It was inexpensive then, very inexpensive. I even collected some Eskimo art—those



carvings.

SMITH: When did you get involved with advising museums, whether college museums or community museums, about what they might collect in terms of African American or other forms of art?

LEWIS: It wasn't until I came to California, in the 1960s. The first museum that I worked with was the Oakland Museum, and it was more than advising. It was curating shows for them and co-curating, giving lectures, and advising them on expanding their cultural visions. It was a good time to do that because with the so-called sixties revolution, people felt they had to do something to satisfy the "restless natives," so to speak. So I did that, I worked with E. J. Montgomery and others, like Ruth [G.] Waddy. Ruth Waddy had an encounter with the Los Angeles County Museum; she was trying to get them to show the works of African American artists. She's really a person who is responsible for a lot of important African American artists, like Mel Edwards and Danny [Daniel LaRue] Johnson. She had an organization here called Art West [Associated]. And of course with the publishing of *Black Artists on Art* then people began to ask me to help them.

SMITH: But of course that's not until 1969.

LEWIS: Right, but I came to California in '64.

SMITH: And that was when you came to study Chinese language—

LEWIS: And philosophy and history. I thought I was coming to study Chinese art



history, not realizing that USC at that time didn't have any Chinese art history. I thought that was very strange. Here they are, right in the Pacific area, and they didn't have any Japanese or Chinese art history. So I had to go back to New York to do my art history, at New York University.

SMITH: Oh, I see.

LEWIS: I was on leave from Plattsburgh, so I knew that I had to go back for one year, so it was sort of back and forth.

SMITH: But you had made the decision then that you wanted to move to Los Angeles?

LEWIS: I really liked Plattsburgh, because it was near Montreal, and I liked the curriculum at the university. I had not really quite decided that I wanted to stay in Los Angeles. But when I went back I realized that there was more here for my children. It was really when my younger boy came to me one day and said, "Do we know any Negroes? What are they like? What kind of people are they? Are they good people or bad people?" These kinds of questions. I realized they were sort of isolated in that region. They didn't see any Asians, they didn't see any peoples of African descent hardly, except at the air base, and the air base people didn't come to the area where the university was. So we just decided that we had to take them to a place where there was more of a multicultural population. And I had a professor 5, which was next to a dean. I had really moved up in the professorial ranks, and after





Florida A. & M. I never wanted to be an administrator again. I didn't even want to be chair of the humanities; I didn't want any of that. So that's what made us decide that we really should leave upstate New York.

SMITH: Were you the only African American faculty member at Plattsburgh?

LEWIS: No, there was one in the high school, but I was the only one on the college level, yes, absolutely.

SMITH: Well, the humanities program at Plattsburgh sounds interesting, what you all were trying to do.

LEWIS: One of the best in the country at that time.

SMITH: How big a school was it?

LEWIS: It wasn't very large. It must have been not more than ten thousand students.

But it was a part of a major university system. We had a relationship with the University of Montreal, and McGill, and it was very exciting. There was an international perspective. It was interesting that when Dr. Angel passed, he was in North Carolina, and I understand that his obituary didn't say anything about his being a college president. He became what we would call a late-blooming hippy. He didn't want any mention of that. He had a Ph.D. in mathematics. He didn't want any mention of that, I understand, so they just buried him as an ordinary man.

SMITH: Well, that's how we all get buried.

LEWIS: I know, we all turn out that way, but generally they have all these



tributes—he did this and that—but he didn't want any of that, which I thought was right in line with his philosophy.

SMITH: What sort of courses were you teaching?

LEWIS: Asian art history. Cornell [University] was the place nearest us that had Asian art courses. I taught Asian art, I used Sherman Lee's book. I didn't teach studio, I taught only art history. I don't think I taught Western art history, I think it was only Asian.

SMITH: Primarily Chinese?

LEWIS: Primarily Chinese. I also did what we called the humanities. That's where I was able to work with Susanne Langer, Robert Frost, and David Smith. So it was art history and the humanities. We did not teach the humanities courses as such, we groomed students to conduct seminars and work with other students—to take leadership roles. We were there, but the whole thing was based on student participation and student organization. It was really quite something. There was a core curriculum around the library—reading the assigned books. Then we would come together in a larger auditorium, and then break down again into smaller groups. In the larger auditorium we would be working with the major persons that we were focusing on.

SMITH: Would those primarily people like David Smith, or Frost?

LEWIS: David Smith and Frost and Langer, in my area. Now there were some



people who did things on music principally. Dr. Yokum I think focused on music, and he had Pete Seeger come. Dr. Lameriana was formerly with Toscanini; he was a major violinist, and I really don't know quite what they did, but it had to be in conjunction with music. So we had music and art, and I don't know if we had drama; I just don't recall all of that, but I do remember certain figures.

SMITH: Now, in terms of your research, you were deepening your understanding of Chinese art. Were there particular periods that interested you?

LEWIS: Oh, yes, I was particularly interested in the Shang Dynasty. Even though the Tang was considered as an international dynasty, I felt that the Shang represented more of an international flavor, like what was in west Mexico, and what was in Africa; that history reached to those continents. That was important to me.

SMITH: You mentioned that you had planned on spending some time in Ethiopia doing research. How were you thinking about African art at this time, and what kind of work were you doing in terms of conceptualizing the different aspects of African art?

LEWIS: Well, the Shang to me represented an aspect of African art, because my understanding was that in the burial grounds and the temple grounds, there was evidence of African elephants rather than Indian elephants. I don't think there are any Chinese elephants; if there are, then that's something new to me. But when I picked up little things like that I knew that there was some connection. I also traced that





whole concept in terms of the archaeological evidence. I felt that I had some African connections there.

In Ethiopia, I wanted to study the pottery and the artifacts from the hill people, the people in the mountains, not in the cities. I wasn't looking at the great Ethiopian paintings or architecture—I guess you wouldn't call it architecture because they were so natural, those temples. I saw Ethiopia as a very complex place, in that they were not at that time considered as Africans per se, they were considered as Caucasoid people, you know. It wasn't until later that they declared themselves to be Africans. So I was interested in that history. It was to me a land that brought together both the concept of Christianity and also an African concept.

I was always working on how to bring these two different types of cultures together—what are the relationships? Ethiopia to me held sort of a key to a kind of relationship between the European tendencies and African tendencies. I don't think they declared either one as being predominant. They were a unique kind of people. In their physical structure, their historical and religious structure, you had Christianity and Judaism—the Falashan Jews, and Coptic Christians, and so forth. I was just fascinated by that, and I guess the Ford Foundation found it interesting. I don't know that too many people were seeking to do that, I just don't know. But I was able to get a grant. I think it was something like \$11,000, which was a significant grant at that time.



SMITH: Yeah. Typically, African Americans have tended to look towards West Africa, on the assumption that their ancestors came from that section, but if you look at other parts of the continent, how does that change your thinking about what "Africa" means and what the culture is?

LEWIS: I am interested in Nigeria, as I said. I did go to Senegal and I spent a long period of time doing research for *Black Art* [: *An International*] *Quarterly* [later, *International Review of African American Art*]. It is fascinating in terms of the literary aspects and the drama and the dance, but not in terms of the visual arts. I wasn't as interested in Senegal as in Nigeria as a place for the visual arts. But, for me, really, the most exciting area of Africa is north Africa, southern Africa, east Africa. Not Kenya, as such, Tanzania, to some extent, but really north and southern Africa. The symbolism that one sees in the architecture and the environment in general is very exciting to me and has always been. Maybe that's part of what I saw in Ethiopia, too. It's a neglected area in terms of African Americans. I think the union of the Asian and the African was very exciting for me—Madagascar and places like that.

SMITH: Did you do research in Madagascar?

LEWIS: I did a little bit. Of course Elizabeth's folks are from Madagascar. They called it "Madaglasco." They have a tale that comes down through their family; in every branch of the family there's somebody named Cera. She used to tell me the tale about her family. She went back and I went back, and now I have a young friend



over there in the Peace Corps, and we're supposed to go back for the holidays. But I was there for a couple of weeks, looking at artifacts. There's no great art as such there but, there is that union of Asia and Africa in terms of customs and racial identity.

My most extensive work was done on a project in Fiji. I started out at the University of Hawaii on a grant. We were tracing the relationship of the Fijians to the Tanzanians, using their chants and not so much their art forms, but their system of relationships, and things of that sort. I was working at first with some people from the University of California at San Diego, which is the La Jolla branch, and somebody from Canada. One was an anthropologist and one was an art historian. Then we had a literary person in there too, working with the chants and sayings.

SMITH: No musicologist?

LEWIS: No musicologist, no. That was kind of strange.

SMITH: How much have you studied in so-called ethnomusicology?

LEWIS: Only briefly, but I did have very strong ties to Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts] when I first came here, and they were very strong in ethnomusicology. I worked on projects with Bernice Regan, I don't know if you know Bernice.

SMITH: Yes.

LEWIS: We even went to Cuba together—Bernice and Alice Walker. We had a project in Cuba. We could go because Bernice went to represent the Smithsonian,





and I went to represent *The Black Scholar*.

SMITH: Was this in the seventies or in the eighties?

LEWIS: No, early seventies. We spent about six weeks in Cuba. But before that I knew Bernice; we worked together on several projects. In fact, I knew Bernice during the civil rights movement, when she was in Valdosta, Georgia. That was next to Tallahassee, of course. But I knew her during that period at Florida A. & M.

SMITH: In the fifties, then.

LEWIS: Yes. But to answer your question, I didn't do any extensive work in musicology, but I did some work. Instead of setting my program so that I was following a particular path, I ended up following a broader path, which included generally the things I should have done, but not in the way that one would expect it to if one was following a plan.

SMITH: Were you publishing articles on these experiences?

LEWIS: With our Cuban experience, as I said, I was representing *The Black Scholar*, and I did a brief article for them, yes. I think each of us did articles for *The Black Scholar*. I wasn't publishing too much then. I didn't do anything on the Fiji experience. But it was a project.

SMITH: In terms of your art practice, which is continuing through this period, you seem to be coming more abstract, more geometric even, as you start to introduce or reintroduce more specifically, African-type imagery.



LEWIS: Right. I think that was part of the reason I liked Islamic art, and the art where there were symbols rather than indications of figurative images. Even with my figurative work of course I became more geometric. From the time I left Asia, I went into a more abstract period. I did some works that are in Amman, Jordan. I didn't go to Amman, Jordan to do them, but they were collected by somebody who bought them for the boy's college in Amman. All abstract. And I can understand why, because of the religion, and customs. I didn't paint them for that, but I do have a large body of abstract art out there, someplace. I know where a few pieces are.

SMITH: When you were in Plattsburgh, did you go down to New York City?

LEWIS: Oh, yes. There's a guy who's at the University of Denver now, Maynard Tischler is his name. He was teaching in the university high school in Plattsburgh, and he went to Haystack one summer, then to Alfred, and he studied ceramics. We started a ceramic business called Taki Tags. It was enamel and ceramics, but mostly enamels. We made very grotesque looking figurative things on enamel plates. And we had bracelets and anklets. We used to get in Maynard's MG and take these works to New York every quarter, to the craft center opposite the Museum of Modern Art. And then business got so large that we couldn't keep up, couldn't do that and teach. So we took everything to the dump and got rid of it, the kiln and everything. But we had a thriving business in New York City.

SMITH: That's interesting.



LEWIS: And we wrote a legend about ourselves. And the legend was about the Taki Indians. We didn't know if there were Taki Indians, so they were called Taki Tags.

[laughter]

SMITH: What kind of contact did you have with the Afri-COBRA people?

LEWIS: I used to go to Chicago to see Margaret Burroughs and William Walker, and I met Jeff Donaldson there. I think I met Jeff before FESTAC '77, because E. J. Montgomery and myself were advisers to the Hausa people in Nigeria, who came to Chicago to set up some sort of support group. I think I began working with Jeff Donaldson then. Afri-COBRA was not well established at that point, but Jeff was working with artists in Chicago who eventually formed the first group. There was a woman in the group that I used to visit and talk with, but somehow they got rid of her and it became an all-male group.

I know the Afri-COBRA people, but I never really had too much contact with them. I did not quite understand what they were doing, and if I had understood it I'm not sure I would have appreciated it too much—the whole idea of setting up a system and following the colors. That's just not my way of thinking, but if they enjoyed it or they wanted to do it, okay. But if I had had the opportunity, I wouldn't have wanted to have been a member, because I'd have found it too restrictive.

SMITH: Many of the 1960s black revolutionary groups were very masculine in their perspective, but at the same time they were also the most militant voices. How did





you feel about this development, where women in some cases, as with the Black Muslims, relegated to—

LEWIS: Well, you see, I never fell into that pattern. Because of *Black Artists on Art*, because of the publishing, the writing, they needed me more than I needed them, so I never felt any of that. Even with the Muslims. I used to go to Chicago and go to their publishing house. And I knew [Louis] Farrakhan a long, long time ago. I knew he was a singer, and we used to have breakfast together, but they never treated me in that way. Somehow I had something that they needed, and I never felt that whole sexist kind of thing. I didn't need them for any kind of visibility. I would never allow myself to be placed in that kind of position.

I feel that even in marriage you're on a sharing basis, and an equal basis. One is not subservient to the other; it's only "till death do you part" if you act right.

There's no "till death do we part" if you abuse me. And I think there was this sort of mental abuse, which I think is somewhat European. I used to talk to Viktor Lowenfeld about this, and there was this tendency then for the wives to walk behind the husband, not alongside them. It was a worldwide thing, probably. The Yoruba people have a matriarchal system, and the women have a lot of voice and a lot of control, but I think outwardly it is the male who is looked upon as the principal authority, which he isn't.

SMITH: I haven't seen pieces where you're dealing in a more protest mode, but it



strikes me that your art from the sixties and seventies does not generally go in that direction.

LEWIS: It doesn't have the "Right on!" kind of thing. I tried to put in my art, even then, a deeper sense of humanity and universal kinds of feelings. My ideas tend to move more in the direction of a universal humankind—we all bleed, we all suffer, we all this, we all that. And when it comes to making a facade or an image, that image can be black, white, green, blue, it doesn't matter, but mine tend to be of African American physical kinds of things, because that's what I see a lot, and that's what I *know* best in terms of how to do those features. But the underlying ideas, the underlying feelings and expressions tend to be, I hope, across the board. You have the same problems or similar problems. I might have different problems in terms of racism and segregation, but we both get ill, we both enjoy life, we both love, we both do all these things. This is what I prefer to base my expressions on. This is the closest I've come to any kind of protest.

SMITH: *Field*, yes.

LEWIS: And you have to read into that, what I am saying. It isn't somebody with a machine gun or a machete. This is another kind of protest, but it's about that same thing. But it's also about centrifugal forces, and you rise up. I did a lot of large linocuts during the sixties. I tried to get the kind of movement that was involved enough yet loose enough to have within those symbols themselves an expression of



ideas that one could not immediately recognize.

SMITH: And there's a variety of emotions that are going on.

LEWIS: Yes. Now I really am trying to rid myself of the writing, everything. I promised Barthé I would do this book. I am going to do this book, because it's a real serious promise I made. He was too important to not have a book or something on him. I want to do it; it's not because it's a promise I made to him, but I'm going to take the time and do it. I'm working on it now, I have publishers, and it should be ready by August. But after that I don't plan to deal with anymore of this; I want to just do my work and go back to being an artist. I've been sort of an "artist on the side," trying to find time, but if I'm still here, that's what I'll be doing. No more of this. Let somebody else write. Let somebody else publish.

A lot of it I have done because I almost couldn't avoid it, because when Harcourt comes to you, you don't want to find the time, but you do find the time, because they are not going to anybody else. When people just come to your door and put it in your lap you almost have to do it if it's something that's important. But now there are other people who will do these things. There were people then who could do them, but the book companies apparently didn't recognize them.

SMITH: In '66 you get a job teaching at California State University at Long Beach

LEWIS: Right. That came out of an Asian studies program with my friend Jon E. H. C. Covell. We were on a grant together at the Freer Gallery in Washington, where





we studied with Sherman Lee, Cahill, and some other people. I first met Jon Covell in Idyllwild, I think. She was marrying trees—you know, the Buddhist ceremonies where trees marry trees. She was real interesting. But she taught at Cal State, Long Beach, and after our program at the Freer, she wanted me to come work with her at Long Beach, so I taught Chinese art history. I don't remember what the seminars were; they had so many students. They had seventy-five students or eighty students in the seminars, if you can think of that as a seminar.

SMITH: That's not a seminar.

LEWIS: That's why I left Cal State, Long Beach. I can't even remember what I was teaching, except for the Chinese art history. Jon Covell's specialty was Japanese art history, and she was the first woman to go into one of the Buddhist monasteries to live. Her name is Jon, J-o-n, and they thought it was J-o-h-n, and they admitted her to the monastery for study. They thought she was a male.

[Tape VII, Side Two]

LEWIS: Dr. Alfred Cannon was one of the big community leaders in Los Angeles when I first came here. He was well liked, and quite well known, and he felt that the Los Angeles County Museum wasn't serving the people as it should be. So they were advertising for a job as curator of education, and even though that wasn't quite my field, the community people and Dr. Cannon thought I was qualified. So they asked me to apply for the job, even though I was at California State University at



Dominguez Hills, and I was very happy. The president at Cal State Dominguez was going to build a center for me, because he knew what I wanted; that's where I introduced Chinese language, so it was just wonderful there, and I was having a great time. But the administration agreed to release me to go to the Los Angeles County Museum for a year. They felt that that was a necessary kind of thing. So this is a place where we knew that, in their move to Wilshire Boulevard, seven [Horace] Pippins disappeared. A lot of things were happening where we felt somebody should at least be around to try and find out what was going on.

SMITH: What was the state of the county museum's outreach programs to the black community at the time?

LEWIS: There wasn't any. I started it with the children's classes. I got people like Naomi Hirshhorn, and Marge Champion and people like that to sponsor the African-American children. That's when I first met Alison Saar.

SMITH: Oh, she was a child then.

LEWIS: Yeah, she was in the workshop there. But you had to pay to go to those children's classes, and most of the children were from Beverly Hills, or Brentwood, and none from the other areas. They couldn't pay, and they didn't grant any scholarships. So I got these people to give money so that we could award scholarships.

SMITH: Now, who gave money?



LEWIS: Marge Champion, Naomi Hirshhorn, who is the daughter of Joseph. I had about five donors who gave considerable amounts, and so we were able to really enlarge the classes to bring in not only African American but Mexican American children. And there was great protest.

SMITH: Protest, from whom?

LEWIS: From the white mothers. They were using the museum as a place for their children to go and learn about art, but it was not a place where they wanted them to mix with the so-called minorities. Of course, they wanted to know what was going on, how did this, almost, riff-raff get in here, you know? So that was another challenge. But I did have these high-powered people on my side. At that time Mrs. Anna Bing Arnold, I think, gave the museum at that time at least a million dollars every year.

SMITH: Who was director at this time?

LEWIS: [Kenneth] Donahue.

SMITH: How was he on these issues?

LEWIS: Donahue was a very nice, kind man, but he didn't assert himself. People like Maurice Tuchman just ran all over him. He was a very gentle man. Stead, his deputy director, was a little bit stronger, but they shouldn't have been in positions of authority, because they exerted no authority. What's her name . . . the associate curator of contemporary art there. She went to the Corcoran Gallery of Art and





resigned from there because of . . . what's the name of the guy who caused all the hurrah with his photographs?

SMITH: Oh, Robert Mapplethorpe?

LEWIS: Mapplethorpe. She resigned because the director there refused the Mapplethorpe exhibit or something, and then she established her own gallery. But she was here then. Her name was Jane Livingston.

Donahue knew Jacob Lawrence, and so did Stead, and when Jake came to visit, I took him over to the museum and suggested that maybe they might want an installation of his work. If they wanted to begin doing something that would be African American, they certainly were safe to begin with an installation by Jacob Lawrence. Not only did they refuse that, but Jane Livingston and Maurice Tuchman almost stepped on the man's feet. We suggested a luncheon that we could have, and they didn't want to be bothered. I think Maurice said something like, "Any little white boy could do what Jake was doing." It didn't take a master or someone who had any kind of ability to do that. That attitude was still there.

So that was part of my fight, and of course when I was at the county museum doing my little work, Angela [Davis] was at UCLA at the time, and she used to come over to see me. When we'd go to lunch in the museum cafeteria the whole area would empty out, because nobody would eat in the room with us. It was like the Brown family eating with O. J. Simpson, or something. It was too much. Bernie



Casey, an artist and ex Rams football player, used to come over to see me, and every time, the information desk people would tell him they didn't know me, they didn't have anything down there with my name on it or anything. Then he threatened them; I don't know what Bernie threatened to do, but he had no problems after that, and I don't think anybody else had any problems finding me either. But I had one of the best offices in the whole building, because I was overlooking that little pool—they've since paved it over. But it was just beautiful, because after Dr. Cannon finished with them they asked me where I wanted to be and what I wanted to do. But Stead and Donahue didn't know what the heck to do about all this.

SMITH: What about Romare Bearden? Was there anybody they were interested in?

LEWIS: No, no. They had the Romare Bearden that was circulated by the Arts America people. Now, I don't know how Arts America circulated the Romare Bearden show in the United States, because they are not supposed to pay for things like that, but anyway, there was some connection to Arts America and the county museum sponsored it, but they didn't have to pay but \$10,000 for the show. And the Jake Lawrence show was circulated by Hampton. But they've never asked anybody to raise any money to buy works by either one of these artists.

SMITH: You mean, still, to this day?

LEWIS: Still to this day. Bruce Davis, a curator at LACMA, has recommended a Romare Bearden print for the collection. This one, over here, *The Falling Star*. I



have number of his prints. I bought them for each of my sons and I myself, and I gave Mary Jane [Hewitt] one, at least I let her pay what I paid for it, which is just about giving it to her. There was one left, and Bruce has expressed an interest in that print. Joan Palevsky said she would buy that print for the museum, but nobody has said anything about Jake Lawrence. He was over there and Howard Fox [Chief Curator of Contemporary Art at LACMA] was telling me yesterday how nice they treated Jacob Lawrence when he was there. How nice. This was yesterday. [laughter] So they really have good hearts. He was trying to tell me that their hearts were pure, you know. But they are not getting any of his works; they are not even recommending that. He didn't say, "Well, Samella, if you would get somebody to buy us a Jacob Lawrence that we could choose, then we would like that." No, he still hasn't said it. I suggested that he might say that, but he didn't.

SMITH: Are there African American artists that they are interested in?

LEWIS: Yes. I don't know if they are interested that much, but there's [Martin] Puryear, they are interested in Betye Saar, they're interested in Alison Saar. They are not interested in any of the people from the Harlem Renaissance, or from the period of Jake, or Elizabeth; they don't seem to be interested in any of those people. They have a Charles White that they bought, but it was haphazardly chosen. Somebody forced them to have that show of Charles White, Timothy Washington, and David Hammons. Fox said, "Oh, well, we have a David Hammons." Well, I know they





have a David Hammons, and I know who gave it to them; they didn't buy it, and they don't exhibit it, the David Hammons body print. I know what they have, and it's seven pieces.

SMITH: Seven, total?

LEWIS: Seven pieces total.

SMITH: Of contemporary work?

LEWIS: Yes, contemporary. The only non-contemporary is a Tanner that's been there for ages. They also have a Barthé, and they have Richard Hunt. Now, they didn't know Barthé; they don't pass slides out on him as an African- American artist, nor Richard Hunt. They have a cast of the same Richard Hunt that is at the sculpture garden at UCLA. I have the slides, because I gave a lecture for them for their docent council, or the education program or something, and they gave me slides of all the African American artists. It would be nice if they had a Noah Purifoy, because there have been some good Noah Purifoy's. They don't have an [John] Outterbridge, and there have been some good Outterbridges. I don't know who their advisers are. I really don't know. If you were doing something on the Harlem Renaissance or something on the WPA, you couldn't find anything over there. Oakland has a good collection of things. Maybe they are mostly prints, but some of them are paintings, and they have had them for a long time; it's a good collection. You could go there and see something on Harlem Renaissance and the WPA, but you can't do that at



LACMA.

You really couldn't do a good paper if you were at one of the colleges in the 1960s here. In the show that David [C.] Driskell did for them, they would not allow anything beyond the fifties. They did not want any political art in that show. If there was political art prior to the fifties, they didn't allow it to be shown. But before that we had done a major show down at the La Jolla Museum [of Contemporary Art], where we went through the whole schmear. It was wonderful, a great show, and we borrowed works from the Museum of Modern Art. We borrowed Picassos and Braques and Lipschitzes, to show the connection with Africa. We also borrowed some German expressionist works, and we had some major African pieces that we got from the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], which came from Rockefeller's Museum of Primitive Art, I think it was. That show was done five years before [David Driskell's show at LACMA]. It was called *Dimensions of Black*. I have the catalog up there.

SMITH: This was at the La Jolla Museum, not UC San Diego?

LEWIS: No, the La Jolla Museum. They just about emptied it out and gave us the whole museum, which was shocking. You know, this was down in La Jolla, and we couldn't get any consideration here at this museum [LACMA]. It was later on that the county museum had *Two Hundred Years of Black Art*, or something. But they would not go beyond 1950.

SMITH: That was the show that Driskell curated.



LEWIS: Right. Jeff Donaldson was offered the curatorial position for that and he refused it because of that. And Carrol Greene was offered it, too. He had done the Bearden show in New York, at the Museum of Modern Art. Jehanne Teilhet was involved in that La Jolla show. I think she's still at the university there. But we went to help her, to work on that project. It started as a class project and moved on up to become a major exhibit on African and African American art.

It was wonderful, but it was very difficult, because some of the students were involved in the movement, and so we had to watch the police, and the police were putting them in jail. Angela's sister was one of them, she was in school down there, and she was in the class. We had a major Rockefeller grant for the students, but we had to give up our stipend for curating because we had to help get the students out of jail. The police followed these so-called radical students and arrested them for anything.

It's really interesting that when I was at Claremont, even the black students—I guess when you teach, the students look upon you as being sort of conservative, or middle-class. You are a teacher, so in order to get a Ph.D. and everything, you must have been quite conservative and you must also have been middle-class, because you had to pay, you know. And I remember students would come to my house in Claremont, black students in particular, and I just picked up that attitude that they thought we were "bourgeois Negroes." I never talked about this with them, but I





thought of all the pain and all the problems, and they just had no idea of what had happened and what's gone on, you know?

SMITH: What was your involvement with the formation of the Black Arts Council?

LEWIS: It grew out of a series of meetings. Of course that was a group that was fostered by the museum installers, and other people who worked at the museum, but it spread out into the community. I gave lectures for the group and worked with them as I could. I wasn't one of the officers or anything, but I did have meetings here at the house. We knew that we had to have some kind of an organization, and I think it sort of developed into the Black Arts Council. It was interesting. Renée Poussaint was involved in it. She's on television; she's one of the anchor persons on CBS in New York. She was at UCLA, and she was the only African American working on the magazine *African Arts*. And Dr. Leon Banks, people like that.

We started meeting in my living room. There were about fifteen of us. We knew we had to have some kind of an organization. The Brockman Gallery was also instrumental in helping to form this cohesive group. So it grew out of a community organization where the guards and the installers and people in the museum decided that they had to also participate and help bring about change. When I went to the Los Angeles County Museum, one of my roles was to find out among the guards who had a college education. And those who had a college education I proposed to the museum administration that they allow them a certain amount of time off to go to



UCLA to do part-time work in art, because many of them had majored in art. There was a woman there who was in the textile division who taught most of the curators who came in there what they knew. She really was their teacher. So my question was, why couldn't she prepare herself to be a curator? At least an assistant curator, rather than being classified all the time as a seamstress. Well, that was the whole change that I was trying to bring about.

SMITH: How did they respond?

LEWIS: They told me if I could find the money to hire other people while those people were out of their jobs taking classes, that they would consider it. I found the money. Mrs. Arnold gave the program \$60,000 to start. They never got around to doing anything. They spent her money, though. She said, "I don't know much about this, but this is what the boys wanted to do." But it never happened. These were proposals. So I did my work, but it was not a popular position that I held.

SMITH: You decided to go back to academia and take a job at Scripps?

LEWIS: Yes. When I took a job at Scripps it was interesting because Scripps's art department was sending students to the museum program that I had in the education department, where I was trying to reach out to the different colleges. That was I felt part of my role also. So there was Long Beach State, and Scripps. We had classes and seminars and did things in terms of the role of the museum in the community, and some of the Scripps students asked that I be invited to come to Scripps to give



lectures, or to do a class, and I did that. So it moved from that to a full-time appointment.

By that time the museum had just worn me down to a frazzle. It was like ten years of my life wiped away: it was so terrible, some of the things that happened. I insisted as the head of education I should be privy to what was going on in all departments. Not the financial, but all the departments that had to do with cultural things, so that I could in some way base an educational program on what was proposed, or what was happening. And I had to listen to so much garbage, and so many insulting things to all so-called minority groups. They put up Native American blankets, and they said, "Now that we've got the blankets up for the Native Americans, maybe we can get a few mariachi bands in here and satisfy the Mexicans too." This is the kind of conversation that went on, instead of straightforward talk, and that's when I realized that museum people in general were not well-trained people.

SMITH: What led you to do *Black Artists on Art*? It seems obvious that a book like that was clearly needed, and to some degree might have been a provocation.

LEWIS: That grew out of Ohio State. When I was at Ohio State, I read this book called *Artists on Art*, and it didn't have anybody but European artists in it, or people of European descent. At that time, I said, "This is a big world, there must be somebody else who should have been in this book." That book started in San





Francisco. I was at E. J. Montgomery's house, along with Ruth Waddy. The three of us were sitting on E. J.'s carpet in the living room, and we started talking about the lack of visibility of black artists in this country and how we really should try to do something about it. This just came up as conversation. It wasn't something that I planned or they planned; it just came up after dinner, and we weren't even drinking. We were just sitting there talking, and we were concerned about the museums and the galleries and the books.

At that time there hadn't been anything published on Jake, or any of us. Not even Tanner was in the books. They probably didn't have many women in the books either, or hardly any. So we decided we had to do something about it. We didn't have any money, and we had no idea as to what we were talking about. All we could do was to formulate something and get it set up. So we assigned each other tasks. All three of us would write the letters to be sent out to artists, Ruth was to mail the letters out, E. J. was supposed to do something, and I was left with the task of collecting the money and finding a publisher. It just so happened that when I came back to Los Angeles I had this friend, David Wong, a Chinese photographer and cinema person; his wife was in my Chinese language class. David was sent over here to study medicine, but he went to Art Center in Pasadena, and then he was at Cal Arts.

So there was David, and then Jerry Manpearl, and . . . let's see. We thought



we needed an interracial group of people to participate in this, that it would be much more effective. Suzy Wong is Caucasian, and David is Chinese, my sister Millie was in on it, Paul and myself, and David Simolke. There were about seven of us who put up a thousand dollars each to start this organization that would produce this book. E. J. and Ruth didn't put up a dime, but that's how we moved ahead on that. We just felt the necessity. The Ward Ritchie Press distributed it. Carson and Robbins, a big advertising agency up on Wilshire Blvd., saw what we were trying to do, and Ralph Carson got a company to come in and talk with us, and they funded us, with the idea that on each sale that we would give them a small percentage. No interest though, interest free.

So it started because we just felt that it should be done and we wanted to do it. And we knew we could do it; we didn't have any idea that we would fail, that we wouldn't do it. Since we had somebody to fund it, we did twenty thousand copies on that first printing, and we sold nineteen thousand of them in the state of California alone in that first year. So we were able to take that money and turn it over and put it into a second volume. Then when we completely sold out the first volume, we took money from the second volume and reprinted the first volume. People were waiting for volume three, but— Nobody believed that we would do anything, including the black artists. People were writing and saying, "Why do you call your beautiful book *Black Artists*? Why don't you call it something else, *Negro Artists*, or something, but



'black'?" You know, "black" was still a bad word to a lot of people. So we said, "You can either buy it or not buy it. You have the choice. We felt that we wanted to call it *Black Artists on Art*, and we were asserting our choices and our right to do so, and you can assert your right not to buy it."

SMITH: What about questions of selecting the figures that you would include and issues of what the standards were going to be for inclusion or not including?

LEWIS: We had no choice on the first one, because, as I said, nobody believed we would do it. We didn't include everybody, but anything that was close to being anything we included. We tried to strengthen it by asking people like Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, and a few others to contribute to it. Leon Hicks was great. We had to write and make special requests to certain people, to plead with them, "Please give us something so we can make this a stronger book." Because most people said, "These people aren't going to do anything, they are just bothering us." They really didn't think we were going to do anything. And we couldn't publish anything without their permission.

The second book was strengthened, because by that time we had built up some sort of reputation, but the first one . . . I said to Paul, "We cannot die and leave this book here"; it's an embarrassment, some of it. The idea wasn't, but some of the works in there I would not have chosen to publish. But it was one of those things where it was either those works or nothing, because nobody believed us.





SMITH: Of course your next book is—

LEWIS: Let me say one thing. It's a good thing we went ahead and published it, because people like Claude Fiddler, whose work is in my house, was a kid in Trinidad. He's from St. Vincent, but he saw that book, and it went to Trinidad, Tobago, to Barbados, and Africa. I couldn't believe some of the places where people said they saw it. There was a Puerto Rican artist that I met, whose last name is Sanchez. I'm trying to think of his first name; he's a very famous Puerto Rican artist. We were in a panel discussion together recently. He said that before *Black Artists on Art* came out he really did not have any belief in his art as being worth anything. He saw the publication at the Metropolitan Museum. That's all they had, so they were showing it, but that's where he saw it, and he said that before that he didn't have any confidence in what he was doing, because he had never seen any work by any person of color published.

SMITH: That's interesting.

LEWIS: Claude Fiddler said that was the first art book he ever read. I think what the artists were saying probably was more important than the work itself, in most cases. But I didn't want to cut you off.

SMITH: When you did *Art: African American*, Harcourt came to you.

LEWIS: That was based on my lectures. I did courses at Scripps, at Claremont, because Claremont College is into black studies. Even though I was a Scripps



appointee, I did a lot of work in black studies, including chairing black studies for two years. This is where Dr. Grimes comes in again. When I did work in black studies, I was able to get black studies to pay Dr. Grimes to teach two of my courses at Scripps. And then I did the black studies courses. I never taught African American art at Scripps.

SMITH: Oh, okay,

LEWIS: It was always the black studies, because Scripps did not have courses in African American art. I taught Chinese art history, I taught Native American, and I taught African art history. Never African American art at Scripps. But that book is based on lectures that I did for the black studies program at Claremont.

SMITH: And there, of course, when you do lectures you have only so much time, and I guess what I'm wondering again is how you decide what's going to be the selectivity criterion for an art that has had maybe too many selectivity criteria imposed on it in order to demean it and negate it. How do you negotiate that question of quality?

LEWIS: Certainly I always try to deal with that whole concept of quality. But quality for me was not based on European concepts, even though the Europeans did things that I thought were more basic to understanding quality than the people in the United States. The word "quality" has been something that's been somewhat offensive to me, because it's who's judging, on whose standards are we basing this,



and what does it come out of? That's why I've tried to base what I choose on something that seems to be understood to some extent and seems to be something that represents a standard that people aspire to who are affected by this particular type of work, or these works. I have never based my lectures, or anything that I do in terms of African American art, on what we'll say this man over here would deem as "quality" in the museum, because he doesn't have the understanding or the knowledge. There is no universal quality, as far as I'm concerned. There is not universal art. You know, the Chinese perspective is different from our perspective; we are limited to what we call the Western perspective.

It's much more involved for me. I try to latch on to something that would capture the enthusiasm of my students and at the same time broaden that perspective so that they could filter in or fill in with something that is available to them now. You lose students if you don't do that. You've got to find a way to have them associate themselves with what you are talking about and what you are doing. I always tell them, "If you don't come out of this knowing more than I do, then I have failed," because they have to connect with something outside of that book, something that they can bring to it that I don't know about.

So I am giving them certain basic ideas, certain basic structures, and I use my concept of design. There is, I think, a concept of order, and relationship. It's like Chinese music; it doesn't have to be the same tone, it doesn't have to be based on the





Western tonal structure, but it does formulate a kind of order, so that if you listen and if you look long enough, you will be able to put it together and keep it within a certain context. I do believe in the old formula that if something goes out it comes back, you know. So we deal with that kind of thing.

It's not necessarily subject matter, but you might *begin* with subject matter, like some of the works of the sixties, you know, the Right On work, the street art, some of it is great and some of it is terrible, I think. So why is some of it great, and some of it terrible? Then we get into those discussions to establish some sort of a rationale for how we approach these things. What kind of lasting impact do these works have? All of these things come into play there.

[Tape VIII, Side One]

SMITH: To what degree is this concept of order and design related to your concept of spirituality? Is there a relationship, or are they separate in practical terms?

LEWIS: Naturally, I have not completely understood my concept of spirituality. It's very difficult to define what I mean by it, even. But I do know that I am moved by things that are not necessarily structurally organized to; it's organized but it's like a vapor. You know, I can't put my hand on it and say, "This gives me a spiritual feeling." I guess I go by what Lowenfeld said, that you try to learn how to organize in terms of space and shape, but once you lose your feeling for things, once you lose your creativity about things, then you have lost things that you almost can't regain, so



you have to try your best to hold on to those things. Even though I don't quite understand it, I see my approach to spirituality as something that I have to hold on to, and I can't allow it to disappear. I can't allow it; it's a base that I hope will never leave me. It's almost an inspiration. Even when I have to do something that maybe I don't quite want to do, that may be hard work or something, I have to find within that a kind of spiritual context or content that will be most important, and everything else moves around it. I don't quite understand my spirituality. I don't want to, either, because then I think I would lose it, I think structurally it would be destroyed, because I think it's an ongoing, elusive kind of thing.

SMITH: I partly asked that because until really very recently what we call art was an expression of spirituality, and thought of by I think almost everybody in those terms. But then when we start thinking of questions of order and design as independent of spirituality, we enter into a new mode that has characterized, I suppose you could say, "modern European art," but maybe it's not simply European.

LEWIS: And this whole thing of animism: people for a long time thought it was superstition. I think trees have life and they have what some people would call a soul or whatever they want to call it. They're something beyond just growing for *us*, to shade *us*, or to bear fruit for *us*. That's not what it's about. I can't really talk to too many people, you can understand that. I don't even try, because I'm not trying to convert anybody to any of this. That's why I liked teaching Chinese art history,



because you are already dealing with Taoism and Confucianism and things of that sort—the humanistic, and the spiritual, and this, that, and the other. So that's as far as I go, and it gives me at least an opportunity to deal with that aspect of spirituality.

SMITH: You were involved with this conference *Art and Aesthetics: An Agenda for the Future*.

LEWIS: Yes, up in Aspen. It was an education conference. Very interesting. What do you want to know about that?

SMITH: Well, what was your role in organizing it, and to what degree did it satisfy your needs?

LEWIS: It was a real challenge. I think one of my friends in Tallahassee, at Florida State, was head of the organization of art educators at that time, and he gave me a role in helping him to organize it, and at the same time I gave a paper. Everything was fine until I got to Aspen, and for some reason, from the first day, the people there made me want to get away, to leave. There was some controversy, and it had to do with race, and things of that sort. I remember so vividly being there, and what happened. I did a very dangerous thing: I took a walk in those mountains in Aspen.

SMITH: Dangerous?

LEWIS: Yes, because you have those trails and once you get up there you don't know where to go, and it's cold up there. It's very dangerous. Every time I hear about somebody getting lost in the San Bernadino mountains, I think of that. I





couldn't find my way out. I finally did, before dark, but it was very dangerous, that experience was one I'll never forget. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't come out the same way I went in. Being in Aspen was wonderful, but the conference itself wasn't for me a beneficial kind of experience. I teamed up with somebody, I can't remember who it was, and we both really felt at odds with the whole thing. It wasn't for me a beneficial kind of experience. There was a musician there who was doing marvelous work with children and young people, but he wasn't a part of the whole conference.

SMITH: Was there some kind of practical goal for it?

LEWIS: I don't think there was any real practical goal for it. It's been a long time, but I can't remember anything of substance that came out of it, nor if what we did there was applied to anything.

SMITH: One of the problems of academia is we recycle words.

LEWIS: Yes, I think that's what happened. Because there's nothing from that that I remember. I didn't gain anything from it except to get angry with some people. You know, this idea of selecting one person to represent a group—that's what I think happened.

SMITH: Meaning, that was your participation?

LEWIS: That's right.

SMITH: And so nobody else was really interested in engaging?



LEWIS: No.

SMITH: Either as a person or as a group?

LEWIS: That's right, that's right. It's like this man over here at LACMA, Howard Fox, said to me, "We want you to help us organize a symposium on the renaissance on Central Avenue." I said, "I don't know anything about the renaissance on Central Avenue." This is going to be held in 1998. I said, "Anyway, in 1998, if I'm living, I might be in the Caribbean, or someplace else. I'm not making any promises to you about 1998. I've never made a study of the renaissance in South Central Los Angeles. What kind of renaissance was it?" He said, "Well, we think that would be wonderful."

SMITH: Well, there are people studying that.

LEWIS: Of course. The whole Getty group was studying it, a lot of them. But I wasn't; I told Michael [Roth] I didn't want to do that. So I didn't do it. If I didn't do it for the Getty I'm not going to do it for LACMA.

SMITH: In 1976 you start an international review of African-American art. That was not its founding title—

LEWIS: No, it was called *Black Art: An International Quarterly*. This came about as an idea that Val Spaulding, Jan Jemison and I had, sitting on *my* living room floor, in Claremont. And we found the money for that. Our feeling was that when you put something in a book, like *Art: African American*, the book will be revised every five



years, but if you have a magazine going, then you can pick up things that you might have left out of a book and you can keep going, and compile a kind of history that other people could use when they got ready to write a book. So that was the idea.

We wanted to publish about forty pages in the beginning. We had no idea what it would cost to print forty pages, just not at all, but we did each have money in the credit unions. Jan was an administrator at Chapman College. Val was teaching in a high school in upstate New York, and I was teaching at Scripps. So we pooled our finances and got a printer who would wait for his money, we made a down payment, and published the first issue in December of '76, which is quite a handsome volume, with a pull-out of Elizabeth Catlett's *Boys Running*. We deliberately made it slick, so that it wouldn't be a rag sheet, so to speak, visually, and that people would take it seriously.

We knew we weren't going to make any money, but we hoped that later on we could pay for the magazine. It was one of those things where we decided that it needed to be done, and so we did it. We had been working on it for five years before Mary Jane [Hewitt] came into the picture. Val died about five years ago, maybe more than that, and Jan went on to law school in San Francisco. So that left you know who. The Claremont University Center, the graduate school, helped a great deal with financing, because they applied for small grants for us from the National Endowment for the Arts, so they helped to sponsor the magazine that way. And that same year I





founded the Museum of African American Art.

SMITH: The one that's now at the Crenshaw Center?

LEWIS: Right. It really started out in Claremont. They gave us space there for a collection, and people began to donate, and Scripps began to buy a few things for that collection. And so all of that was during the same year.

SMITH: Now, at this time did you already have the network of connections in the Caribbean and Brazil and Africa and so forth that would allow you to carry out that kind of truly international approach?

LEWIS: Yes, I did. I had contacts in Cuba, which the United States government said I shouldn't have had, and I used academia as a reason why I should have. That as a scholar they could not obstruct any opportunities that I had for research. So I was getting not only information from Cuba, but we published some work in the early volumes. I had contacts in Africa, and I had certainly been to Senegal and done research. I had good friends who owned major collections in Africa. Ben Enwonwu, who just recently passed, was a great Ibo sculptor in Nigeria. And then through my friend Jimi Lee, I had great contacts in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados. I had contacts in Haiti because I was in and out of Haiti around that time. And Brazil. All through the late sixties and early seventies I was in and out of most of those places, meeting with artists. I had a friend who was working as a cultural person in most of these places, especially with the airlines, with BWIA International Airways, and he



would get tickets for me—not only for myself but for my photographers, and maybe for somebody to help me document things. It was just unbelievable. So that was my beginning in terms of the Caribbean, and in terms of Africa.

SMITH: What was the state of modern Caribbean art history, Afro-Brazilian art history, and modern African art history? The individualized artists and movements?

LEWIS: Right, let's take the Caribbean. When I went on my trips, I found out that the only place in the Caribbean where they were really teaching art and had a movement going was Jamaica. In the rest of the places they weren't teaching about it, but they were testing students on art, with no text books, no anything.

SMITH: European art or Caribbean art?

LEWIS: Mostly European art. They were talking a little about Caribbean art. But it was Mrs. [Edna] Manley, in Jamaica, who really started the whole movement of documenting and teaching about Caribbean art. Of course you had Rex [M.] Nettleford doing the dance, and at the same time Barthé was in Jamaica, and people knew about him. So there was a consciousness. Karl Broodhagen came from Guyana, but he was teaching in Barbados. He taught in the high school and he taught about Caribbean art, but there were no publications of any sort. There was a small museum that was mostly run by Europeans in Barbados. There was no museum in Trinidad and Tobago. In Jamaica, there was the big gallery of art there. Another place that was inviting African-American artists was Guyana. They invited people



like Tom Feelings and Herman ["Kofi"] Bailey; they went there to work as artists and with artists. There was a pretty good art movement in that area.

In terms of contemporary African art, the Oshogbo people probably had the greatest movement in Nigeria. Of course, they didn't start it; it was started by an Australian, I think . . . her first name is Susan, I'll think of it. I guess Ulie Bier went to Africa and did some writing on the movement, and then after that he went to the Pacific islands, I think. I had information on that, too. But that was mostly what was going on there. The Nigerians also had a really good anthropological museum, but it was art, and most of the early pieces, Ife, and so forth, were in that museum, so you could go there and study. I can't think of too many other places where they had museums. Of course Trinidad was just seven miles of waterway from Venezuela, which of course is very exciting in terms of peoples of African descent.

SMITH: Was Cuba recognizing the Afro-Cuban artists?

LEWIS: Oh yes, absolutely. Of course, Wilfredo Lam had given Cuba a lot of his work, and in their museum they had a lot of Afro-Cuban artists. In Cuba at that time, the artists were recognized and given space and also stipends to work; they had to pay back by giving two works to an institution, like a school, if I understood it correctly, but they could sell everything else. So they were selling to people in Europe and Canada and other places where Cuba was recognized. I went there and I expected that artists would be very political, you know, nothing but propaganda.





There was a "propaganda mill" sort of place where they did the posters, but to my amazement, some of the artists I talked to were definitely anti-Castro, but they were not persecuted because of it. I think the only way they would have been persecuted would have been if they had done something physical against the state, like blowing up a building, or something of that sort. But they were not jailed for what they thought. I was surprised, because we were told that they were persecuted and this, that and the other, but I didn't see that with the artists, and I didn't see many of them who were pro-Castro.

SMITH: Even in the seventies?

LEWIS: In the seventies, yes. They weren't pro-anybody. They weren't pro-Batista, they just didn't care. I think probably they didn't especially like Castro. It wasn't because of any atrocities or anything, it's just that they didn't feel as free, I guess, under *any* dictatorship. We gave them our own list of people we wanted to meet, and they said, "Well, you can meet with these people if they agree to meet with you. We can't force them to meet with you." Alice Walker was particularly concerned, because they didn't have many women writers, and the people in the literary area seemed to have been all men. When we were there, what's his name, from the black group with the guns and so forth, up in Oakland?

SMITH: Oh, the Black Panthers?

LEWIS: Yeah, the Black Panthers. Huey Newton was there. He was in exile in



Cuba. We were going to have dinner with him one evening, and I guess he was supposed to have killed a black woman before he left Oakland. And Alice Walker asked him point blank, did he kill her? I don't think he satisfied her, so none of the group would eat with him, because Alice was rather disturbed by his response. So we felt, we had to live with Alice, so if he didn't satisfy her then he wouldn't satisfy us either. So it was interesting. We didn't let down on our own politics and our own beliefs while we were there. But I was the only one in the group who was interested in art. I went through the museum and I was allowed to photograph everything in the museum. And as I said, to my surprise, a lot of it was not political.

SMITH: The late sixties and early seventies was the period of the reemergence of feminism, and sometimes feminism and black issues have been seen to be in conflict and other times not, but what were you thinking at this time about the new feminism?

LEWIS: I was very active with the feminist group here: Judy Chicago and others, Miriam Schapiro.

SMITH: The Women's Building?

LEWIS: It was before the Women's Building. I used to have a little gallery. In protest of what happened at LACMA, I opened a gallery called The Gallery, on Redondo Boulevard; that's near Olympic. It was a beautiful little gallery, and we used to meet there. We had nice exhibits there; one we had was called *Cookies for Dough*. We made dough sculptures and baked them—men and women did this—and we sold



them; the proceeds went to the formulation of the Women's Building. I was active with them, we used to go to all of their meetings. I used to curate some of the exhibits for them. I did a Catlett show, and some other things. I was very close to Schapiro and Judy, and the women who supported that movement.

SMITH: In the seventies, a lot of women were involved in consciousness-raising groups. Did you participate in those?

LEWIS: No. I didn't have to do that. It was white women. We black women were called "sapphires," you know. There was a difference in terms of how we felt about ourselves.

SMITH: You also had a gallery on Pico [Boulevard]?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: The Tanner Gallery?

LEWIS: That was our gallery. It was later called The Gallery Tanner; it was the same gallery that we moved from Redondo to Pico. Joyce Thigpen wanted to learn about galleries, so she asked us if she could intern in the gallery, and we said yes. We moved part of the museum things in there, then we realized we couldn't have a museum and a gallery in the same building. It was twice the size it is now. We had the place next door, and then we had the place where Joyce is. So we did separate them, but they were still connected. But the IRS said, "No. One is non-profit and one is for profit, so you can't do that." We couldn't use the same budget. So that's





when we moved out of that place and moved to Santa Monica and later the May Company. Then we said to Joyce, "If you want a gallery, you've got it," so we just turned it over to her.

SMITH: So you haven't been that active in its day-to-day operations?

LEWIS: No, not any more. I became active in the Museum of African American Art at the May Company. That's when Mary Jane became active. She had just left Occidental College. She was around, and I said, "Why don't you join me in this effort?" So we became co-directors, and then she became director and I became the curator.

SMITH: So you did all the shows?

LEWIS: No, I didn't do all the shows. I did most of the shows. We invited people like Betye Saar to come in and do a show, and we invited other outside people to come in and do shows.

SMITH: What about your relationship to the California African American Museum?

LEWIS: We tried to make these one museum. I worked first with Yvonne Braithwaite Burke. Our museum was started before their museum, so we thought that since we were doing art, and Yvonne wanted that museum to focus on history, that it would be nice to say that this is the historical part and this is the art part. Yvonne's friend, Aurelia Brooks wanted an art museum. We called Maya Angelou and all those people together who were on our board, because we were going to try



and make one board, and it didn't work; Aurelia didn't even come to the meeting. So that fell through. It would have been much stronger and much better if we could have made one museum. Since I had been helping Yvonne, I helped them with their first three shows. I did the opening show for them.

SMITH: Which was?

LEWIS: It was people like John Outterbridge and Betye Saar, and some others. I've forgotten the name of it, but it was contemporary black artists. The second show was *Duck Decoy Carvers*, which they had to extend. It was so wonderful, people just didn't want it to go. The third one, I think, was Richmond Barthé, and there was something else.

SMITH: You also did a show of Elizabeth Catlett.

LEWIS: Right. I tried to work with them, but Aurelia was firing every director who came in there. Not firing, but making certain they would leave. They had some good directors in there, especially a woman from Houston. That first director was very good, but it didn't work for her, because Aurelia generally wanted to be in the limelight, and she really had very little art training. She was charming, but she had very little art training. She always pushed the others aside, and they could never get a foothold in terms of community.

Now I am going to try and work with Jamesina Henderson, but they are setting themselves up on the same model as the Los Angeles County Museum, with a



business person being the director. And they have no curator, none at all. I questioned that, and of course that was published in the paper, and [Aurelia's] not too happy with me, but that's okay.

SMITH: Of course, Lizzetta [LeFalle-Collins] seems to curate most of the shows.

LEWIS: Yes, but she's gone. She came back to curate the [Noah] Purifoy show, but I don't think Lizzetta plans to deal with them too much. They need a curator who's going to be there to help make aesthetic decisions. I said that, but I don't think it made too much difference. We offered them the Richard Hunt and Richmond Barthé show [*Two Sculptors, Two Eras: Richmond Barthé and Richard Hunt*] for free. They didn't take it. It was in storage here.

SMITH: The show that you put together for [USIA-Arts America]?

LEWIS: Right. They didn't get back to us. And then USIA said, "Well, you have to give the works back to these people," so we had to. Richard wanted his works after a while. He didn't want his work just in storage, so all of that was dispersed and they lost out.

SMITH: Now, is that you think because of the lack of an on-site artistic director?

LEWIS: I think so. They didn't know how to approach it or what to do. They didn't see it as important to do anything right away; they wanted to take their time, and time was of the essence, because the USIA was going to pay for these works to be returned. They were winding down their program, and they couldn't wait.





SMITH: Now, in theory, Los Angeles is big enough that there's no reason why it couldn't have two black museums.

LEWIS: I know. But that one [the California African American Museum] really was founded for history, and then the art was brought in.

SMITH: But it is now an art museum.

LEWIS: No, it's going back to being a history museum. The name has been changed back to history. It's no longer history and culture, I don't think. Half the board is appointed by the governor, and part of the problem was that a lot of people didn't want to give art to the state, like giving them collections that would eventually go to the state. They saw it as going downhill, and many people thought that the state was going to take that museum and make something else of it.

SMITH: But the art belongs to the [California African American Museum Foundation], rather than to the museum.

LEWIS: That's right. The only art the museum has is the Sam Gilliam piece that's in front. Now they are trying to amass an art collection. They asked me to be on some kind of board to help them select, but I don't really choose to do that. I told them, "If I'm in town, and if I have the time, I'll see what I can do, but don't put me on any board."

SMITH: It's a difficult task. Even if these things were in the county museum it would be difficult.



LEWIS: That's right. So I'm dealing with that.

SMITH: A number of people have told me that you really have been instrumental in creating a public for black artists in general, and instrumental in developing the public careers of several artists in particular. As you assess your career, do you share that opinion?

LEWIS: I am a little surprised when I hear this and when people give me lifetime achievement awards for doing certain things. Does it mean I'm supposed to die tomorrow, or what, you know? [laughter] I have never stopped to think about what is happening; I just do what I think should be done. I am surprised at the number of people who say that I have done something. I don't really look back and think about what I might have done, except if I have done something awful that I am ashamed of, which I try not to do. I'm really a little surprised, because I have never really thought about much of this. I guess I put \$200,000 into that magazine [*Black Art: An International Quarterly*], when I figured it out.

SMITH: When you totaled it all up?

LEWIS: Yes, and Clarence Avant said, "Why did you do it?" I didn't have an answer for him. I did it because I had to do it. I guess Elizabeth always said to me, "If you don't like the way something is going, get in there and do something about it." I never forgot that, that was my freshman year. Don't just complain, get in and do something about it. That's been my motto, what I've operated on, without referring



to it or thinking about it too much; it's been a part of my make-up, my belief system. I haven't done these things because I said to myself, "I want to go out there and do something for black artists." I want to go out there and do something that I have to do and that I can do, for people.

I think it's as important for white students to know about African American art as it is for African American students. It gives the African American student a sense of worth, but also it gives the white student a chance to see some of the history and garner some sense of value in that person's culture. So it's very important. People say, "How can you teach at Scripps with all those white people?" I say, "They have to learn also. And it's very important for *them* to learn, because they control the money."

SMITH: This may be inaccurate because it is word of mouth, but I heard a story that when you wanted to curate an exhibit of Jacob Lawrence at Scripps, the art gallery said he was just a folk artist or something, and they didn't want to have their gallery wasted on him.

LEWIS: Well, they didn't quite say it that way, but that was the implication. I did the show, but I did it in the Clark Humanities Museum, which I was controlling. But I wanted to do it in the art galleries. There is a Scripps-Pomona connection, they have art galleries. So, yes, that's true. It's also true that there was a traveling exhibit of Jacob Lawrence's work that went to Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. It





was his personal collection. We sent only the prints to Africa, because we didn't want to send the other fragile kinds of pieces to Africa. Scripps sponsored that show in terms of keeping the books and doing the paperwork on it, and in exchange they were able to put something of Scripps in the catalog. It was beautiful. The catalog is printed in English, French, Spanish, wonderful. So it was a chance for them to get Scripps out there. They also had the opportunity to pick up the show after two years, to have the final showing of it coming together at Claremont. The gallery director said, "We don't have space." The administration could not believe it. I just told the current president about it not too long ago. She could not believe it. And the dean could not believe it. I said, "Oh yes, they were offered that show." And you know where I had to send it? To the [National] Afro-American Museum [and Cultural Center] in Wilberforce, [Ohio]; I'm going there in about two weeks, for the final showing of these works. Jacob Lawrence.

SMITH: This is still happening in 1997?

LEWIS: Yeah. Scripps.

[Tape VIII, Side Two]

LEWIS: Roger Abrams, [the former head of humanities at Scripps] didn't want students to get credit for a humanities seminar on African American Contemporary Art and Humanities because he said none of those people were qualified to teach. The individuals who had agreed to give lectures for the program were Maya Angelou,



Alice Walker, Howard Smith, Elizabeth Catlett, Kenny Burrell, and Mary Jane Hewitt, who would serve as coordinator. But I went to the president, I didn't stop at the dean, and I said, "This is really unbelievable, these people are more than qualified to teach." So it passed. I had raised the money for it.

SMITH: When did this happen?

LEWIS: Oh, in the early eighties.

SMITH: Before you retired?

LEWIS: Before I retired. But then when Alice Walker won the book prize, they had the nerve to ask her to come back and be the commencement speaker, after treating her so badly. Alice would not accept their invitation to be the commencement speaker, and it was based on the treatment that they gave her, and her friend, Toni Morrison. Toni came there to speak and none of the creative writing people came out, or the people from the English department. And the now renowned prize winner from the Caribbean, Derek Walcott, came. They didn't come to hear him. I think by that time he had a MacArthur grant, but he hadn't won the Nobel Prize. But in my student relationships, and my relationships with a few faculty members, Scripps was great for me. They have a good sabbatical system, and they don't overwork you. You can teach two days a week if you want to, and the classes can function with twelve to fifteen students.

SMITH: Why did you decide to take what seems like an early retirement?



LEWIS: I had just finished a Ford grant, and I went back for a year, and I wanted to continue my work. I don't believe you can do research and work in fields that you don't know much about and do it on a summer basis or for two months every year. So I needed the time. I was the only one teaching Chinese art history there, and I thought it was totally unfair to my students to make them wait for me. I enjoyed them, but I didn't want to do that anymore. Even though I had a full professorship with tenure and everything, I still had a considerable number of years that I had to do to get to the end of it. But I didn't want to stretch it to the point where I was miserable and they were miserable. It wasn't right. So I decided I would take an early retirement and in taking the early retirement I couldn't take any of the retirement money, because then I would not have put in the amount of time needed.

SMITH: Oh, I see.

LEWIS: So the president there at that time decided that I had made some kind of contribution to the school, and he got the trustees to buy an annuity and give me the interest. Which he did. It was \$10,000 every year for life.

SMITH: Not bad.

LEWIS: Not bad. They told me to leave it in there for three years and it would accrue to a much larger amount. So I got an annuity.

SMITH: To what degree was your leaving just based on being fed up with having to deal with ignorance and indifference?





LEWIS: No, I wanted to go and do what I was doing, and work in the Caribbean and do research, that's really what it was. I could put up with ignorance and fight my way through that. [laughter] But no, it had nothing to do with the "hardships," quote unquote, because when they created a hardship I found a way out of it. We went through some battles. I even sued the school, and everything else.

SMITH: For what?

LEWIS: Well, I had a fall, and it was on campus during work hours. It was a color (not racial) thing. I was going downstairs, and the carpet was red and the wall was green—that resulted in a neutral and made it darker. I tumbled down the stairs and I had a shoulder injury and a neck injury. At first I didn't realize it. I was so embarrassed, you know, I didn't realize how badly injured I was. But I reported it the same day. Those schools are really trifling and strange about these things. They had insurance, but they just said, "We're going to take care of it." They never did anything. About a month passed, they didn't do anything, and I'm in pain. I had to go to Kaiser, knowing all the time I wasn't supposed to be going to Kaiser, because with that kind of injury you're supposed to be assigned to a doctor and they're supposed to pay for it.

I went two or three times, and they didn't do anything. So I went and got myself a lawyer. It didn't go to court or anything, but they had to pay the lawyer, they had to pay the hospital, they had to pay therapy for the rest of my life if it



reoccurred—they had to pay for everything. And then I found out there were a number of people around there who had had problems but didn't know what to do, especially women. They were afraid of being fired if they reported anything. So I just opened Pandora's box for them, then people started saying, "Well, if she can sue you, I can sue you too," you know. People said, "How can you work for them and sue them too?" I said I was doing exactly what they would do to me if I ran the school. They've got the insurance. I'm not suing them, I'm just demanding that they pay what they are supposed to pay for my bills. But people thought that was strange.

SMITH: As an emerita do you still have regular contact with Scripps?

LEWIS: Oh yes, they send me information on everything, the dinners, and this and that.

SMITH: Do you occasionally teach out there?

LEWIS: No. I don't teach anyplace. I'll give lectures and I'll do a few things, but I don't want to teach. I won't go back into that. I work with some of their students, especially students in African art, and I loan them my books, but they have to come here.

SMITH: In terms of your classes, let's say the class on African art, what did you consider to be the useful texts that students needed to read or ought to read if they wanted to learn something about African cultural systems and how to look at the art in terms of a larger perspective? Were there books that you thought were valuable?



LEWIS: There were two. One of them I believe was called *Primitive Art* [by Douglas Fraser]. I think the author taught at Columbia University. He's dead now. I didn't like his title, but I did use his book. I used another book, one of my favorites, which was more on contemporary philosophy and contemporary politics of Africa, by Basil Davidson. He had a liberal leaning, and he understood African culture. He did not go into this whole thing of horrible governments, but he went into cultural systems. But I didn't use any one book.

SMITH: But these were things that you would then assign in the class?

LEWIS: Right, as textbooks, yes.

SMITH: What about a book like the one I got assigned as an undergraduate, when I took a course in African history: *Muntu*[: *An Outline of Neo-African Culture*], by Jahn Janheinz?

LEWIS: Yes, oh yes. That was on my reserve list, yes. Oh yes, that's up there also.

SMITH: Did you ever teach a class in Caribbean art?

LEWIS: No. I taught Caribbean art in conjunction with African-American art.

SMITH: In addition to your own books, *Black Artists on Art* and then *Art: African American*, what are the other texts that you assigned in your African American Art class?

LEWIS: I assigned [James A.] Porter, and Alain Locke's books on history and philosophy. Then I had my book, and I had on reserve a book [*The Afro-American*





*Artist; a Search for Identity*] that was done by a woman in Tennessee, Elsa [Honig] Fine. It came out just before my book. I guess it showed her perspective. She evaluated all African-American art from the perspective of comparing it to the works of particular white artists.

LEWIS: I purposely assigned that book, not as a textbook but so that they could see some of the differences. I think it was important for them to understand.

SMITH: What about a book like [Amiri] Baraka's *Blues People*?

LEWIS: I did that also. That was one of the texts. Absolutely. Baraka used to come here to the Mafundi Institute, and I have a lot of photographs with him. You know his daughter, don't you, Kelly Jones?

SMITH: Oh, yes.

LEWIS: She's very bright.

SMITH: Was she one of your students?

LEWIS: No, she's New York based. But she is very, very bright. I think she's almost the cream of the crop coming up now.

SMITH: I also understand you've been a trouble shooter or an adviser to a lot of community-based arts groups and museums. I mean, you have spent a fair amount of time going all over the country helping different groups look at what their programs are. How much time do you spend on that kind of thing?

LEWIS: Not so much anymore, but Wilberforce has a grant from the Lila Wallace



people and they really don't know what they are doing in reference to the visual arts. They have no idea of what's going on, and it's not just that grant or this particular exhibit that they are proposing, it's the whole museum problem that they have. So I am doing this because my friend E. J. Montgomery pleaded with me, and after a while I said, "Yes, I'll help you." But I don't do this very much anymore, because, as I said, I want to get to my own work.

SMITH: You have one more book that you plan to write, or you are finishing up, the book on Barthe.

LEWIS: Right.

SMITH: Do you have any further research plans or writing plans?

LEWIS: No. My grandson, who is very bright and a great computer whiz, is putting my talks that I have given in museums and workshops and galleries on the computer for me. I'm going to choose from the talks and lectures that I think work, and maybe get somebody to publish a number of those. I think that would be kind of interesting. I'd like to know what I said, also.

SMITH: Looking at what all you've been involved in, it seems like you must not have had very much time to be an artist for ten, twenty years, or something. You were still producing things, but it must have been really hard to find the time.

LEWIS: It's very difficult. Even in faculty meetings I would draw. Every chance I got. But I wasn't really being an artist as such. I had a studio in Claremont, and I try



to have a studio in different places, but no, I haven't really had that much time, and it's been very difficult. That's why I'm sort of fighting to get back to it, because I haven't gotten being an artist out of my system. I'm still an artist, that's basically what I am. I've taken time out to do some other things, but basically I see myself as an artist. I see myself going back to the old and combining it with the new, something I can do that runs through all these different time periods. I think I am now ready to pull them together.

SMITH: In the early 1990s you resumed painting in a big way, or maybe even more the mid-1990s. The style is actually somewhat different than what preceded, and I wonder how your thinking had changed. I know that a lot of these things are not consciously thought through, but you clearly have an approach that you are experimenting with in the recent canvases.

LEWIS: I don't think I've reached the style or the place where I want to be. That's why I need to have the privacy, the silence, the time, the space. I haven't reached it. I guess if I'd reached it I'd stop.

SMITH: Maybe then something else would come up.

LEWIS: Yeah. But I still think that I have quite a distance to go to get where I want to be to even feel comfortable. Every now and then I'll do it. I think the last piece I did where I felt a certain amount of satisfaction was the one that Maya Angelou bought. The [Wadsworth] Atheneum wanted to buy it, but I made a choice, and I





decided that more people would see it in Maya's house than at the Atheneum. I know that's the case, because she likes to entertain, and people come in, and I just wanted it to be there because I wanted to influence people about art. But that's not the only reason.

SMITH: Which painting is this, could you describe it a little?

LEWIS: I have slides of it, but it's a painting that captures somewhat an Egyptian kind of feeling, even with the technique; it has glazes and it looks like an ancient kind of Egyptian work. It's a mother and child, but the child is on a pillar of salt, and the mother is in a wonderful Ghanaian garment of green and reds, like a Kente kind of thing, and her face is very stylized, but very beautiful and tender. The background is intermingled into the whole thing. It's a beautiful painting, I think. And when Maya saw it she said, "I've got to have this. Sister, I've got to have this." It's the focal point of her house in North Carolina, and it's beautifully placed.

It was about two years ago that I made that. Since then I've been interrupted a lot. Even the Getty interrupted me, but they did allow me to focus on the Barthé book. It just took me out of what I was doing and I went back to the Barthé, which was fine. I don't think I would have gone back to it as quickly if they hadn't offered me the opportunity.

SMITH: Do you think that there's a tension between being a race spokesperson and being able to pursue your own individual vision?



LEWIS: I don't see myself as a race spokesperson. I see myself as a person who knows something about African American culture and life, but I also know something about European culture and life, and South American culture and life. I think what happens is that so few people know much about anything except themselves.

SMITH: And not even that, often.

LEWIS: Right. In my family, of course, we're multiracial and I've got my grand-kids, a boy and a girl, and their mother's white. She's wonderful. She's a little batty, but she's one of the nicest persons I know; the most dependable. She and my son just couldn't get along, but that's not his fault or her fault, they just didn't match. So I don't feel as though I'm just representing the race as much as dealing with human beings, and there's probably more lack of understanding in terms of African Americans than there is in terms of Europeans, and I happen to be more African American than anything else, so that's what I know. I'm just expressing myself. No, it's no burden, not at all.

SMITH: Okay. What about the Caribbean show that you put together? How did that come about?

LEWIS: It came about because this woman from Trinidad asked me about fifteen years ago if I would help her make more visible the artists of the Caribbean, and I said yes. She knew a lot of them, and I knew a lot of them, so I promised to help her, but it ended up that when we finally got the money for the show she took a job with



UNESCO in Kenya. So it was all in my lap. It was either that or drop the whole program, which was like a million dollar program. This kind of thing had never been done in terms of works by peoples of primarily African descent, but that's what the Caribbean is about. It's a calaloo; it's a mixture, but most of the people are of African descent. I dropped the project twice, because the people who finally ended up with the money were people who knew nothing about the Caribbean and had never been there, and there was nobody to communicate with to make any sense out of things. When I said I wasn't going to do it because it was too difficult, the artists said, "Well, we're not going to do it unless you do it." So we knew it had to be done, and that's how it continued. Have you seen the catalog [*Caribbean Visions*]?

SMITH: No, I haven't.

LEWIS: I have it, I'll give you a copy. If you read in the front you'll see where the people in Virginia implied that they were glad that I stayed in there, because I had quit twice.

SMITH: Why, exactly?

LEWIS: It was very difficult. They were trying to send me to places where there was no art. I knew about it, and they were trying to cut short the places where I needed to go and spend more time. It was that kind of thing. I knew it couldn't work unless I really worked at it, and they didn't understand that. This was their first Caribbean show. I think they had done one African show, but it was based on some





collection someplace.

SMITH: When you do a catalog, assuming that you have enough money, what is it that you want to see happen in the catalog?

LEWIS: Well, for the Caribbean one, I wrote an introduction, we'll say, but I found specialists to write about the culture. It's very important that people understand the impact of the environment on the culture. It's this kind of thing that I try to build up. Art generally grows out of the ceremonies that pertain to the cultures—the religion and so forth. I have about five segments where attention is given to certain areas, and I try to focus. I don't just make a conglomerate of works, but I try to segment them so people can understand what I'm talking about. It's basing the art on a number of factors rather than saying, "It's something that we just do. It just happens." I try to educate as I curate.

SMITH: The museum in New Orleans now has a lot of Louisiana art. Have you been involved in pushing them?

LEWIS: Yes, and they have had people like Leah Chase on the board, and I've talked with her. I was responsible for that Elizabeth Catlett show that they did, because they hadn't thought of it. I've reminded them of certain things, and that's my involvement, and also working with people I know who are currently on the board, to help them. Because usually they appoint people to the boards who don't know anything about art, especially African American art. They might have money, but they don't know



anything about art. So I have tried to work with people who have been appointed.

I've stayed directly out of any controversy with them. The last time I was there I had a discussion about Barthé, because they had no Barthés in their collection. I thought that was pitiful, that they didn't have at least one, since he reached his mature years there, before going to the art institute, and then he was going back and forth; he was a well-known figure in the city. I thought they should at least have his *Longshoremen*.

SMITH: In terms of contemporary black art, how do you evaluate the different trends? What are the directions that are most interesting to you? I know that's very personal and subjective.

LEWIS: Most of it I like. I am a little perturbed about some of the reoccurrence of the derogatory images, where people say we should laugh at ourselves, or that it's confronting the enemy, so to speak, if we project and show those things, like the minstrel kinds of figures and things. I don't know if you've seen those.

SMITH: I know people who are working on that field.

LEWIS: I think outside of a historical context then we might be creating problems for ourselves. I think the person who satisfies me most in this is Camille Billops, in her depictions, and of course her husband is writing alongside what she's doing, about historical contexts.

SMITH: I'm thinking of somebody like [Robert] Colescott, who's built his career on—



LEWIS: I'm not a Colescott fan. It has more to do with his treatment of women than with the black-white issue. I don't think he ought to make them beautiful necessarily, but he should not make them absolute idiots. I don't like his work at all. His work is something I could easily do without. This idea of George Washington Carver crossing the Delaware is pointless to me, because he's taking a major figure and making a buffoon out of him. I don't know that there's something to laugh about there. I think it's a wonderful painting as far as technique and everything, but I guess it's his subject matter that I'm differing with. I can't ignore the fact that he is putting things in a derogatory way that I would prefer not to see; it might be that I'm just out of touch.

SMITH: A lot of issues of sexuality and gender have to do with AIDS—and also black gays—which has become a more visible issue, and that leads to a whole different kind of approach, which probably makes a lot of middle-class, religious people feel uncomfortable.

LEWIS: But I don't think what I am objecting to has anything to do with gays or lesbians or anything of that sort. I think an entertainment factor is coming into play and those things are catching on and people are saying, "Laugh at yourself," and all these kinds of things. It has nothing to do with sexuality, it has to do with brutality. They have a perfect right to do it, but I would like a better sense of why they are doing it . . . maybe they don't have to have a reason. Except that I think it's putting a





lot of pain on a lot of people, and it's bringing back memories to a lot of people who don't need that pain. It's probably going to alienate African Americans rather than making them develop and grow around this kind of thing.

It's like the Holocaust. You have to look at it in a certain light. In essence, they are saying, "It's funny." They're not saying it's not funny, because they are just presenting the raw material. There's one guy, he's not black, but he's out there making polaroids of these derogatory images and just pasting them up. I don't know what that's about. It need not have any rationale, but I know it's causing a lot of pain to a lot of people. So many people fought and died to get rid of this, and here it is back, and their own folks are doing it.

SMITH: It's an aspect particularly of European and North American culture to turn everything into entertainment, and I wonder to what degree, when you look at contemporary Caribbean and contemporary African art, do you see an alternative road?

LEWIS: You don't see any of that, I can tell you. This is something that we have to think through a little. No, it goes more into spirituality when you think of Caribbean and South American and African art. People trying to recapture lost things of substance rather than recapture buffoonery. No, this art is being fostered by wealthy whites who like to be entertained, like the guy here in Santa Monica, the computer guy, Peter Norton, and people like that. He's funding this. I'm not saying it out of the



air. I know he's funding a lot of these things. He funded the *Black Male* show, and he's funding Kara Walker. As I said, Camille is doing a different thing, and also Betye Saar has done different things. You have a clearer picture of what they both are saying.

SMITH: I know that you have mentioned that you particularly like Alison Saar's work, and I wonder what it is about her work that speaks to you so much?

LEWIS: Well, with the kinds of materials and the expressions she uses, I think she captures a certain life that has to do with not just ordinary people, but, we'll say, that segment of society that includes the pimps and the street women, a certain kind of individual who has been left out of society, but who's been there. She doesn't deal with any religious aspects; it's a kind of fast life, in a way, you know—*Sweet Thang*, and pieces like that. She uses the prickly, paper maché kind of technique, and I think it works really well with what she's saying. It's full of color, and I like her work very much. It's a folksy kind of tradition, but it goes beyond that in that it's contemporary life. It still works as important art. She's raised it to that level. I don't know anybody else who's really doing it at this time.

SMITH: Well, we'd better stop for today.



SESSION FIVE: 17 JUNE, 1997

[Tape IX, Side One]

SMITH: When we left off last time, we were talking a little bit about Kara Walker, who, as you may or may not have heard, just received a MacArthur fellowship today.

LEWIS: Aha! I hadn't heard.

SMITH: I wanted to talk to you a little bit about the question of recognition, and how the nature of recognition has changed for artists in general, but specifically for African American artists. We were also talking about the question of the way in which art has become associated with brutalization and pain, rather than with uplift, to use a term from the forties. The two things do overlap. I thought maybe we could start out by discussing what you expected as an artist in the 1940s, what you thought was even feasible to happen to you as an artist.

LEWIS: Well, certainly I was an artist out of necessity, because of experiences, and you might say a certain amount of pain. Because I needed a voice to respond to situations, and I lived in an area where if you had to use the spoken word, nobody would listen to you, or they would think you were not quite sane. Because the things that I felt, if I had put those in words, then—

SMITH: Like poetry or songs?

LEWIS: Well, I did write poetry, but if I had written them in a prose sense— I know people like Langston Hughes and others put theirs in prose; they used the dialect





sometimes and they used a kind of vernacular terminology to express themselves, but they were saying very serious things. I didn't know how to write or speak that way, but I did have similar kinds of feelings. So I found from an early stage the idea of symbolic visual expression. I had to respond to things through visual means. My best works came out of being really disturbed or upset by situations, and they were my response to those situations. I had to get up at night many times and work, because I just had to say something. And in saying something that meant I had to paint or to draw to get it out of me or to begin communicating with my feelings. My feelings at that time were somewhat violent responses. I would have been a very good revolutionary in terms of the Black Panthers, if they'd had the Panthers at that time. I would have been a very good one I think, a very devoted one, because I felt so strongly about the injustices that were going on at that time.

I saw such terrible things. Even these postcards and things that people have collected, with blacks washing their faces in the toilets, and things of this sort, the derogatory images. I guess I can't respond to seeing them as teaching anybody anything that is of a nature where they are going to learn something from it. I was reading the article on Colescott in the *LA Times* last Sunday. I don't know if you remember that I mentioned that I was offended by his interpretation of women.

SMITH: Yes.

LEWIS: It wasn't just black women but women in general. And he proved my point,



in a way, when he was asked a question about women, because he said he saw them mostly as sex objects; it was a very sexist kind of response to the question. The interviewer said, "Well, what about their minds, rather than their bodies?" And he sort of said, "Well, maybe I'll come to that later on." In so many words, that's what he said. I tried my best to get over my feeling about him, and then when I read that response, I said, "Well, I don't want to be prejudiced against this man because of his subject matter, because he's a good artist, but I just can't deal with the ideas." For me, I guess you could be a wonderful artist, according to the system, but if you're not a decent human being, I don't bother with you.

In the forties, my doing art had to do, not necessarily with my political beliefs—though you could call it politics or political beliefs—but with my deep concern for the injustice that people were suffering all around me. And I, being black in New Orleans, in Louisiana, suffered in an empathic manner. I never had anybody brutalize me, but I have seen other people brutalized and treated in a manner that affected me. And I think a lot of that is still happening. People are being exposed to a kind of mental lynching, in terms of their own cultural beliefs, in terms of not believing in themselves. I was really offended when I went to Hampton and they didn't show any of the African-related pieces that I did, because they strictly speak to African religions. They didn't recognize any of that and held it back.

SMITH: They had a couple of Shango pieces.



LEWIS: I know, but those were not the strongest ones. There were some that I wanted to be there; I'd just assumed they would be there.

SMITH: You said that the piece that you did of the Obeah was very important to you. In *Caribbean Visions* it explains that an Obeah is considered a vengeful, negative, retaliatory figure.

LEWIS: By those outside, yes. They probably saw that as being so, but not within the context of the African tradition, no. And I know that I am from that culture.

SMITH: Maybe they didn't use the term, but were there equivalents or analogs to the Obeah women in the Bayou Teche region when you lived there?

LEWIS: Oh yes, yes. We called them hoodoo women, which is the same as a voodoo priestess. And my Aunt Laura was one. She was trained, you know; she grew up practicing African religions. Most of the people in that area were baptized as Catholics, but they moved to a more earthy kind of practice and religion, because many of their ancestors were from Haiti, and even the Catholics of course practiced what we call hoodoo, because they were afraid not to believe. So it's just like Brazil. Marie Laveau, down in New Orleans, had a scheme going, where the people who worked in the big houses would pass on information by singing and chanting songs from one house to the next, so she knew everybody's business, everybody who had a house servant.

SMITH: From what you have said, you didn't expect a career in art.





LEWIS: No.

SMITH: So even though you were an art major at Hampton, you didn't expect that it would—

LEWIS: Right. I didn't expect a real career in art because I didn't think about it, I really didn't think about it.

SMITH: Now, is that because there wasn't any recognition outside of the black colleges?

LEWIS: Oh yes. Lowenfeld had us showing in the Virginia Museum, and other places, and I sold a lot of work. I sold so much work I was embarrassed, because I thought something must have been wrong with it, because unless it's commercial, who would want to buy it? So it wasn't that, it's just that I simply did not think about it. I sold work to a lot of people outside of the black college area, in New York and other places. But I simply did not think about being an artist. When I was at Hampton I was still functioning and working based on not making art as much as expressing myself. Lowenfeld helped me to retain that perspective, because, being a psychologist as well as an art educator, his direction had more to do with the mind than with the hand or with the body. He had us to examine ourselves internally through our art. That's really what he was doing. And so that fed right into what I was already thinking, and what I was motivated by anyway.

SMITH: But of course the idea of art as expressing yourself rather than a career has



deep roots even in European elite culture as well as in the folk cultures that America comes out of.

LEWIS: In New Orleans my friend has asked me to do two commissions, and I just will not do it. I can't paint for other people. I can't do sculpture for other people. I can't do it. Usually when I do it, I try not to do anything that I don't like. I'll destroy it first. But it's not easy to let it go once I do it, once I finish a work. It's not easy. I remember winning a prize at an Atlanta University art exhibit; it was a piece of sculpture I sent there. I was so certain I wouldn't win a prize, and it happened to be a purchase prize, and I won. I was really depressed, because it was like I had lost something very special for me. Of course Lowenfeld tried to talk with me about this kind of feeling, and he put it in terms of not wanting to share. In so many words, that's what he was saying. I got to the point where I didn't want to sell anything, and I just didn't want to let go. That's the way I felt. There are certain pieces, like the one with the lamp that's at Hampton—I don't know if I told you, but I had it at the Stella Jones Gallery in New Orleans. I thought I had put a price on it that nobody would buy, especially in New Orleans, but on the last day of the show it sold. I'm still not too happy about it . . . the last day. So instead of sending it back here, they have to send it to her gallery. If you are going to show in a gallery, you have to have things for sale, you know. I said, "Nobody's going to pay this for it," but it didn't happen that way.



I guess I feel close to the things I do because they are expressions of ideas that I'm thinking about, and I've been thinking about. I still contend that most artists have one or two really substantive ideas that they work with, on and on and on. I could go to Italy, I could go to France, and I think I'm still looking for similar things. I don't think what I'm looking for changes. There might be some changes in what I see or what I receive, but they fit into the larger picture, those changes, because there's something that's already there.

SMITH: I was going to ask you if your fellow students at Dillard or Hampton or Ohio State felt similarly to you about what they were doing?

LEWIS: No. I don't recall that there were any really substantive art students at Dillard. I think that's why Elizabeth Catlett and I became such good friends, because most of them were just art education majors, who were not serious about what they were doing. Wanting to do, I think, but not knowing how.

SMITH: So they were going on to become high school teachers?

LEWIS: Yes. And I never wanted to be a teacher, really. I was sort of pulled into it by Lowenfeld. When I was in high school, my teachers tried to get me to major in home economics. So that really infuriated me there. Not that you majored in anything in high school, but they wanted me to focus on being somebody in home economics. I wasn't going to have it. Number one, don't tell me what I'm supposed to be anyway. If that's what teachers were doing, then I didn't want to have any part





of that. They would call it "guiding me along the path of what I could succeed in," I guess. So that was high school. Junior high school was fine. It was high school where I received those kinds of suggestions. Grade school and kindergarten were much nicer. And then at Dillard, if it had not been for Elizabeth, I would have found someplace else to go. Not that it wasn't academically a good school, but there was no art there, really. The art teacher was a disk jockey, "Dr. Daddio," they called him. He was from an art family, but they were in commercial art. He was nice enough, but no substance.

SMITH: Was there opportunity for black people to get jobs doing commercial art in the forties?

LEWIS: Yes, in Chicago. There were opportunities in commercial art in the black community—commercial art for the newspapers and books and things of that sort.

SMITH: But that wasn't something you were interested in?

LEWIS: Oh no. I did a few signs, for people who sold cows and things of that sort; they were very nice. With house paint on wood. People could hang them out, like hanging out a sign. I wish I could find some of those, because I did them as an artist would do them, and I think I put some lettering on them; it was really very important to me to do that kind of thing. But it was something that my mother asked me to do for somebody, and I treated it as something that I really wanted to do.

SMITH: Did you ever consider social work? Partly I ask because it seems like a



surprisingly large number of black artists got social work degrees.

LEWIS: I never ever thought of it, no.

SMITH: Ruth Waddy is one example, and Curtis Tan. Noah Purifoy did that as well.

LEWIS: I think social work possibly works too much in the system for me. I don't know if you know what I mean. It's too much a part of the system, where you go out there and you get people to do what the system says they should do. I'm not completely anti-social work, but I think the system can be wrong in many instances. I think we'd be better off if we would follow our more natural tendencies than to be systematized or grouped. The system groups people and it puts them in compartments, and it doesn't allow for enough individuality for me, so I don't think I could participate in helping to train people to do that kind of thing. I think that's one reason I could never teach on the level of the public school system, where I would have had to do that kind of thing, which is like social work, you know.

SMITH: What about the state of community art programs, let's say in the fifties in Tallahassee, for example. Were there programs that enabled people in the community who had a need to express themselves to do so?

LEWIS: No. There was nothing in the city of Tallahassee in the fifties, but at the university we had an evening program where we invited people to come in to work. One particular person, Margaret Collins, used to come in, and she was head of the biology department. There were some people who were high school or junior high



school students who came in on Saturdays. We did have that at the university where I was head of the art department. We set that up. But there was nothing in the city of Tallahassee where people could go and work in the community, no. No art programs at all, except at the university in the art department. I'd almost forgotten about that, but we did have the Saturday programs, and the evening programs for the adult faculty.

SMITH: What was the black arts community like when you came to Los Angeles?

LEWIS: Well, the most important group of course was Ruth Waddy's group, and there was Alonzo Davis—

SMITH: That was a little later though.

LEWIS: That was a little bit later.

SMITH: Because you come here in '64. The Brockman Gallery starts in '69, as I recall.

LEWIS: Well, then Ruth's group was the one, Art West. I found them almost as soon as I got here, and I worked with them. Mel Edwards and Danny Johnson, all those folks were here at that time. Ruth really led a good group of artists, and we did things together. And then Alonzo opened his place. We all worked in the Watts festivals, too.

SMITH: Those started in '65, actually before the rebellion.

LEWIS: Right, right. We all exhibited in Watts, Noah Purifoy, and numerous other





artists.

SMITH: Did you have any connection with the Watts Towers Art Center?

LEWIS: Oh yes, oh yes. I was on that board when we were trying to save the towers. The city was trying to bulldoze the towers. I use to go out there and work at the center and I think at that time the students were designing textiles for the Supremes. A lot of things were happening, it was really nice. I used to work with John [Outterbridge] at the Compton Communicative Arts Academy—John and Judson Powell, yes. And I did some work for the Watts Willowbrook Center there. It's not an arts center but sort of a medical center. I did an outdoor sculpture for that project.

SMITH: Were you involved with [the] Mafundi [Institute]?

LEWIS: Oh yes, absolutely, and Dr. Alfred Cannon.

SMITH: What do you think about the fact that you had a professionalized art world and then you had this community art program, which could easily fall into a sort of "park and rec" kind of thing? Maybe that's fine, but wasn't there a tension between what you were trying to do in terms of providing opportunities for people versus creating a culture?

LEWIS: Right, right. Soon after I arrived in LA, I was fortunate to work with Joan Ankrum, who owned the Ankrum Gallery. She became a very good friend. I liked her style. She was more the kind of human being that I liked. She asked me to bring



some work for a fundraiser she had for something about children, and my work sold in a couple of days and then she asked me to bring more work and it sold, so I became a part of her group. But I think I stayed with her a long time because she didn't impose anything on me.

To get back to your question about those two different worlds, I didn't see them as different. I fed on one, shall we say, and expressed myself and put it out there in the other. I don't think I could have functioned a hundred per cent in the art world per se. I would have dried up. I don't think you can express yourself without being a part of something or someplace. You have to continue to be a part of a community. You can live in China for twenty years and go away and still express a certain amount of what happened to you in China, but if you didn't take something there with you to transfer in terms of yourself, you can't do it.

I think part of my self was more entrenched in a community kind of world than in a professional artist kind of world. I didn't really see them as being so separate, except sometimes when they had those discussions about form and structure which were completely isolated from any kind of symbolism based on human values and human concepts; then I was bored. I tried to be polite, but I was bored. It was like being in a faculty meeting. [laughter]

SMITH: Sometimes you have to go through it though.

LEWIS: Yes, you have to be, not just being polite, but "professional," whatever that



means. I remember one time I was really so tired of people talking about a professor and how terrible he was. They were saying all kinds of negative things about him, and yet they would promote him, they kept him. So I asked the question, "If he's so terrible, then why are you keeping him? Why don't you just let him go someplace else?" They couldn't answer, they couldn't respond to that. They didn't want to respond to it, because they were enjoying themselves talking about the man, and they were enjoying the dialogue that takes place in academia and with artists who are using artistic jargon—what's in vogue for this year, and so forth. Instead of using the term "folk artist," he's a . . . what is it they call it now?

SMITH: Oh, "outsider art."

LEWIS: No, they don't call it that any more. "Intuitive." [laughter] So I get a little impatient with some of that.

SMITH: Yes. Word magic. Which wouldn't be so bad if they knew that that's what was happening.

LEWIS: I'm excited about a lot of things that have nothing to do with what I do, or what Romare Bearden does, or what Jacob Lawrence does. I'm excited about things that maybe I don't quite understand, also, but I'm also unhappy about some things that are out there that motivate me to have memories and recall situations that I don't want to have to go through the whole thing of being disturbed by them. I know that you go through life and you are going to be disturbed about something, but I don't want





that kind of erosion of human dignity, as I see it. I just don't want it, personally. If that's what people want and they thrive on it and they do it, that's fine.

SMITH: But a lot of contemporary culture, especially elite culture, has come increasingly to be about that.

LEWIS: Yes. I think there's room and for me and for others. I'm not saying it shouldn't be, but I'm saying that if I have to go through seeing that come around again, that I don't want the experience. I think there's as much racism now as there was then. I think people are behaving themselves as long as they have to, but when they are told they don't have to really behave themselves, then they're going to go out and be little bad people, then they're going to go out and do that. And I don't think there ought to be any strict rules that say you can't do this, but I think if people behave themselves long enough, then they will get accustomed to treating other people with some kind of dignity. But I think if those other people say, "I am a nigger bitch," you know, a lot of people are not going to understand that, even the people they are trying to chastise. That's all right, I'm staying out of it.

SMITH: To what degree were you involved with the California Arts Council programs or the National Endowment for the Arts? When Noah Purifoy was on the California Arts Council, he planned a lot of things regarding artist and community programs. Were you involved in discussions about how those might work?

LEWIS: I was only involved in a multicultural panel, or something of that sort. I was



replacing someone, so I was never really involved that much in the California Arts Council. I was involved in the National Endowment [for the Arts]. I was on the panel for three years, and then I moved to another panel that had to do with museums, and I guess they saved the big money for those places, so I saw the workings of that, too.

SMITH: So the kinds of museums that you have been advising for the last thirty years would then come to the NEA to get money?

LEWIS: Yes.

SMITH: But they wouldn't get the big money, they'd get the medium-sized money, if they were lucky.

LEWIS: And when the Studio Museum [in Harlem] applied for a grant to do *The Turbulent Sixties*, they were turned down twice, and then when I was on the panel, I saw that they were going to be turned down a third time.

SMITH: Now, why was that?

LEWIS: Because the museum panel was made up of museum directors, mostly. I was the odd person on there. And they were getting ready to turn them down again, so I talked with a few of the directors, and some of them hadn't even read the proposal. I could easily tell that, because when I'd ask a few questions, they were making light of it, like it really wasn't an important proposal.

SMITH: So if it had been Andy Warhol it would have been important, but because it



was David Hammons it wasn't?

LEWIS: That's right. At that time he wasn't important. They had in their heads what was important and what wasn't important, and according to the directors this shouldn't have come to them as a museum panel, it should have gone to Expansion Arts.

SMITH: So there was a problem with the NEA staff directing it?

LEWIS: No, it should have gone to them, but in their minds, they were museum directors, it should not have come to them, so they were treating it like it really wasn't there. And because I was there they couldn't make it go away. It was interesting what happened.

SMITH: Now, was it because it was black art, or because it just hadn't been validated by the gallery system?

LEWIS: They didn't know those people, and they knew it was a black museum, and they knew if it was a black museum, then it could not be "high" art, so to speak.

SMITH: Did anybody say that?

LEWIS: They didn't say anything. They just didn't regard it as being something they should even think about.

SMITH: I see.

LEWIS: Until I brought up some of their proposals and quizzed them on those. I told them I was so much in favor of the Studio Museum getting the grant that maybe





I should leave the room while they voted. However, I would also take the way they voted into consideration in deciding how I would vote on *their* proposal. I just sort of threatened them with a filibuster. So they passed it, and they passed it with the stipulation that I would serve as a consultant.

SMITH: Oh, to make sure it was "serious"?

LEWIS: Yes. Can you believe that?

SMITH: Who was director of the Studio Museum at that time?

LEWIS: Mary Schmidt Campbell was the director. But they weren't serious about it, they were throwing it out.

[Tape IX, Side Two]

LEWIS: Certain museums are guaranteed their three or four hundred thousand dollars yearly, and here comes this Studio Museum in Harlem putting in this proposal for something that certainly couldn't be art, it had to be nothing but politics. They saw it as politics. I don't know how Max Beckman got through a lot of folks. They just ignored his politics, I guess. I don't know how Ben Shahn got through, because combining political expression with the artistic or aesthetic was not a popular thing at that time. It certainly was not acceptable in the fine art world. I remember when I did the book on Elizabeth Catlett, [Harry N.] Abrams [Inc.] was really interested in it, and the same guy who is president now was president then. He said they wanted the book, but we had to clean it up and take the politics out of it and show only her art,



with no discussion of her political life. I said, "Well, I wouldn't want it, but check with Miss Catlett first and if that's what she wants then I'll try and get together with her and let her do it." But it was not acceptable to me. And she said, "Absolutely no way." She would not even consider it. But I'm sure they made exceptions. When they published things on Max Beckman, they had to put the politics in there.

SMITH: I'm not so sure, actually.

LEWIS: You're not sure? Maybe not.

SMITH: I think there's an aspect of this where the politics is unimportant. You know, like with Picasso, okay he's a communist, but it's unimportant, so you don't need to talk about it. Maybe a sentence.

LEWIS: But with Beckman—it's true with Picasso, too, but with Beckman the work is steeped in politics, and it's the same with Ben Shahn. But I guess they just talked about the form and the relationship of shape and color.

SMITH: And you can say, "Sacco and Vanzetti were two prisoners who were executed, Shahn was opposed to this, and it was a big political controversy," period.

LEWIS: Right, right. When I did the Jacob Lawrence show, it traveled, and the State Department wanted to exclude a painting he had in there that had to do with some invasion in Central America, and I said, "No, you can't do this. If you do that then let's cancel the show." So they left it in there. They were afraid of offending folks. I guess the new art history allows for and in fact almost demands something



about the artist's point of view or perspective. And so it's okay. I'm sure I could go back to Abrams with the same manuscript and they would love it. [laughter]

SMITH: Were you on any art panels at the NEA? Reviewing artists' proposals?

LEWIS: I was on NEH panels. I was on Expansion Arts, I was on the museum panel.

SMITH: Now, Expansion Arts was designed to do what?

LEWIS: Community art programs.

SMITH: What were your concerns when you were sitting on Expansion Arts?

LEWIS: My concerns were to try to see to it that we were really dealing with community art programs rather than giving money to those approved political kinds of bases. I'll tell you what I mean when I say that. In Hawaii and other places, there were some people who were getting funds, mostly Caucasian people, to teach the little Hawaiian children how to do ballet and so forth, which is okay, but there was no program at that time to help them with their native or their indigenous kinds of expressions. My concern was to try to deal with indigenous cultures. I had some partners in that, especially in dance, and people that I worked with.

I guess the most shocking incident for me on the Expansion Arts panel had to do with a proposal that came up for the Women's Building out here. They were almost laughed off the table because people didn't take women seriously as an art group. Of course the panel was men and women, but even the women didn't seem to





want to support a proposal that had to do with all women. At that time I think there was a rift, and there probably is still, between black women and white women, and so the resistance came from black women who didn't want to support the Women's Building. And the grant was for \$15,000. I'll never forget it.

SMITH: That's all we're talking about?

LEWIS: That's all we're talking about. That was almost the top grant in Expansion Arts. They just gave them enough to limp along, not to do anything with it. But I had to fight like the dickens to get that grant through, and they just got tired of hearing me. Vantile Whitfield hated to see me coming, because he figured there would be something coming up where I'd continue to talk. When it was approved I really felt good about it. But I always supported to the best of my ability those things that had to do with indigenous programs. There's something still going on now, somewhere in the Appalachian mountains. It's not Tennessee—

SMITH: Oh, in Kentucky?

LEWIS: Yeah. Apple Shop. That was one of my pets.

SMITH: They've done quite well.

LEWIS: Yes. Well, that was the kind of thing that I tried to support. I was on the panel for three years. It was very difficult, believe me. You know, flying to Washington and dealing with all that nonsense. But I was pleased with some of the things that were funded. There was a junior arts academy in Dallas. I worked with a



group in Miami that had a program where they brought the brightest high school students in the country, about four or five hundred of them, to Miami, and they brought in a famous artist to work with them, an artist, a dramatist or a musician. So that was the extent of my teaching on that level. But I liked being on the Expansion Arts much more than the other panels.

SMITH: So you were on the museums panel, Expansion Arts—

LEWIS: And the National Endowment for the Humanities.

SMITH: And what were you reviewing for the NEH? Was it art history type of stuff?

LEWIS: No, it was music, but it was mostly writing—books, literary things, dictionaries, mostly from academia. That was a panel where you didn't go every time. You were appointed, and then you'd go back home and then you were appointed to another panel; they had different panels. You reviewed proposals for people who wanted to write books. You could write a book and they would publish so many copies of that book.

SMITH: Oh, I see.

LEWIS: So it was that kind of thing.

SMITH: Last time you brought up the Women's Building, and you did have basically a positive relationship there, but the Women's Building seems to have a history of a lot of internal strife. I wonder if you have any perspectives on what happened there?



LEWIS: I managed to do what I had to do for them and with them, and not get involved in that strife. I know it was going on. I worked with Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, and people like that, and I guess I worked with them early enough so that everybody was excited about what was going on. Then when I later started working with them and curated some shows, it was as a guest curator. I worked closely with them early on, when they were not yet in their building. They were in an old art school that everybody went to.

SMITH: Oh, Chouinard?

LEWIS: Chouinard, yeah.

SMITH: Before we move on, I wanted to go back to something you said about Colescott. You obviously have a response, a personal reaction, to him and his work, and yet historically, within the black community, there has been an ethos that you don't bring up these divisions and disagreements unless you have to. I wonder how you balance the things that you are critical of with operating in a way of building unity, to the degree that one can?

LEWIS: I have made some mistakes I think, and of course I have done some things I've been sorry for. If I've said something nice about somebody, sometimes I'm sorry I said anything. I shouldn't have said anything. So, in terms of appeasing the black community, I don't think I have necessarily been famous for that, because I have spoken like I felt or I've left people alone. Ray [Raymond] Saunders would say to





me, "I don't want to be in any black shows. " I say, "Okay Ray, you don't want to be in any black shows, then fine. I will not invite you to be in any black shows." I just leave him alone.

People would call me and say, "What does it take to get into this magazine [*Black Art: An International Quarterly*]?" And I'd say, "Well, it takes me putting you in there." Then they say, "Well, it seems to me that it should be open to everybody." And I've said, "Not as long as I pay for it it isn't." You know, these kinds of things happen, and I don't have any problems telling people. It's not that I don't like them, but I don't like what they are doing. I think it has paid off in that when people come and ask me something they know I'm not going to just say something to appease them.

A lady called me today and wanted to know about something that she was thinking about buying; it was a Jacob Lawrence portfolio. It was for sale at a gallery in Michigan and they really were putting pressure on her. I said, "Well, you have to go by what you think about it." She said, "What do you think?" I said, "Well, you're not buying what I think, you're buying what you like." She said she still wanted to know what I thought. I said, "Well, I didn't buy it. You can take that for whatever it's worth." I told her I had one piece, but I didn't buy the entire portfolio. I'd rather have the *John Brown* series. It's interesting that when *John Brown* first came out, a lot of black people wouldn't buy it. They wouldn't buy the images that didn't have



blacks in them, such as images of John Brown and his sons. That's amazing. But that's what you get I guess when you don't have the historical background. Well, anyway, that's another story.

SMITH: And that's also an aspect of identification. Part of black power involves that sense of immediate self-affirmation.

LEWIS: Well, now, a lot of those guys had this self-affirmation, but they were still hanging out with white women. How do you justify that? Was it that they could *conquer*? Is that what it was?

SMITH: Well . . .

LEWIS: You're not being interviewed. [laughter]

SMITH: I'm not trying to justify it. You know, Eldridge Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice*, had an argument— Well, you remember what his argument was. You can't ask students nowadays to read that book because it would take too long to explain it all.

LEWIS: I know. Yes, yes.

SMITH: But what did you think of the black power movement, the Panthers, and US?

LEWIS: I liked Malcolm, and I liked the Panthers until I was in Cuba and talked to Huey and found out that he had no response about the charges of killing that woman.

SMITH: This was the bookkeeper, who apparently found out something.

LEWIS: Yes. US is an organisation I'm not clear enough about to like or dislike.



Ron Karenga is not one of my favorite people. He was very brutal to women, I understand. I'm not just a feminist, but I do believe that women have been brutalized to an extent where it's disgraceful that people should not understand that. When I was teaching at Cal State Long Beach Karenga told a couple of my students that they shouldn't read the white man's books, but at the same time he was at UCLA working on a Ph.D. And he certainly couldn't have gotten a Ph.D. from UCLA without reading the white man's books. So my response to my students was, "If the honorable Ron Karenga says you are not supposed to read the white man's books and the white man wrote most of these books that we're using, then he'd better come and take the exam for you, because I don't think you're going to pass it if you don't read the books." I don't know whether it's true about his causing a lot of pain to a lot of women. I just . . . if that's what US is about, then I can't have that much respect for it.

SMITH: I know that you're a scholar and an artist and not a politician, but if you had—

LEWIS: Well, a lot of what I do is political.

SMITH: Yes, that's true, but did you have a vision of how the liberation movement ought to go as you were developing?

LEWIS: My vision was that we had to establish a kind of discipline and an organized approach to our own culture in terms of history and art and music; it was incumbent





on us to do the research, to do the work that was necessary. In terms of the Los Angeles County Museum over there, I suggested that instead of begging them to do something with us or for us, that we should demand 17 percent of the tax money from the city of Los Angeles, because at that point we were 17 percent of the population, so that we could buy our own museum. Not to separate ourselves, because I was for working with my good friend Naomi Hirshhorn and people like that, but I was also for working towards building institutions that would foster legitimate black culture, based on research, historical background, and knowledge. I wanted to do something like that.

The "Right on!" kind of thing didn't interest me in terms of a kind of protest; it excited people, but it didn't end up with any substantive realistic direction. I didn't work *against* it, I wasn't working for it either. [pointing to her print *The Field*] This [image] had nothing to do with the protest; it's about rising up and reaching for the centrifugal force of the sun . . . the enlightenment. I guess I was not angry with my own people, but I was in a way disappointed that we didn't do more to educate ourselves in terms of real history. We didn't have to go to Africa to do it.

SMITH: Well, a lot of black studies programs were founded, and you were the chair at Claremont, I guess.

LEWIS: I worked with the black studies program at the Claremont University Center. The graduate school was in that division. But that was sort of a volunteer



position. I sent students to Africa, to the university in Ghana, and to Ethiopia. I sent them on different research projects in Africa. In the early seventies I was traveling to Africa and helping to plan the Festival of African Peoples [FESTAC '77]. Going to Africa was very good, but there was so much here that we could have been doing for ourselves.

I still think that if people give you something, it's going to be from their perspective, and you can't ask them to do otherwise, because people are who they are, and ideas are channeled through experiences. I still think that some of our strongest artists are the so-called folk artists or intuitive artists. They don't channel through anybody's experiences except their own. They represent a transitional group, for me.

SMITH: The individualized folk artist?

LEWIS: Yes, and what they do in general. Even though they get ideas from dreams and visions they recall, it's still something that is so much a part of *them*. And when they express themselves, a lot of it is really a substantive kind of what we call . . . what is it when you're not a fool . . . common sense. The word is almost out of our vocabulary now. [laughter]

SMITH: Yet in your Caribbean show you made a decision to select mostly academically trained artists?

LEWIS: Well, mostly, yes, because we were talking about the contemporary artists



who were academically trained, the proposal was written for that, but also because when people go to the Caribbean, they see only the intuitive or folk artists; they seldom go to a trained artist's studio. So I felt that both deserved some attention, but especially the academically trained artists who held on to indigenous kinds of expressions, like LeRoy Clarke and people like that. I thought attention should be given to them also.

SMITH: I was talking to Keith Morrison about two years ago, and he was actually chuckling, because people look at something in his work and they think that it's related to the indigenous or the folk culture, and it is in an oblique way, but really what he was thinking about was Matisse and the Fauves. And then he said, "And don't I have the right to?"

LEWIS: Yes, he has the right to, but Keith knows that it's his identification with being a Jamaican that has gotten him pretty far, not his identification with the European group—maybe the technique and the forms, but the ideas that he expresses basically come out of the Caribbean.

SMITH: He doesn't deny that.

LEWIS: I think with all of those artists there's been some influence from outside of course, nobody is denying that. When you look at Claude Fiddler's work, you know that he's been heavily exposed to European art. But also you know that European painters have been heavily exposed to the non-European artists. In terms of art





history, I really regret to a large extent that we are still turning out students who think that everything began with Picasso, Braque, Matisse and so forth. They see those artists as having no relationship to earlier periods. Who is it who did that wonderful big standing woman at the Museum of Modern Art?

SMITH: Oh, Gaston Lachaise?

LEWIS: Gaston Lachaise, yes. Straight out of India. But they are not taught any of these things. Why? I guess when I was teaching at Scripps, I got so tired of feeling as though I was teaching a bunch of kindergartners because of their lack of knowledge of world art. I kept saying to myself, "Why do I have to do this every semester?" That was the only place they were getting any of this information. And it's still happening that way. Phyllis Jackson is there now, but she's trying to combat it by fighting about whiteness. Who cares, you know? Let whiteness stay there and add some other colors to it. [laughter] Because you waste your time.

SMITH: But the university sets up things in such a way that they say, "Well, okay, you want black studies, you're over there, you're the professor of black studies, and that's fine, do what you want to do, but just study black studies."

LEWIS: That's right.

SMITH: And what you seem to be talking about, and what's really evident in the Caribbean book, is a counter-universalism, not a separatism. Which doesn't deny that things have to be broken down into their discrete histories, but there's still a sense of a



universalist humanist perspective that's superior.

LEWIS: That's what I believe. I believe that. It's been very interesting. Unless I'm really involved in what I'm doing, I refuse to do it. It's because when I say I am involved, I'm not talking about my hand and my writing, I'm talking about my mind, I'm talking about my innards, my spirit. In terms of the Barthé book, if I wrote according to the tapes, or the things that I've read about him, it would be for me a dull book. I have to incorporate those things in a spiritual way and a way where the focus is on my understanding in relationship to this man and his art. I'm sorry, but that's the way it has to be. I can't be impartial about it. One of my professors would say "You have to divorce yourself from the thing." I can't. How can you do that? What do they call it? There's another term that's used where they're saying you can't really get involved in this because it becomes too personal.

SMITH: Oh, subjective, yes.

LEWIS: They say, "You have to be very objective about this, you can't be subjective." Well, I can't do anything unless I'm subjective about it. I have to keep an open mind so that if something comes up where I think I should say this or not say that, based on my feelings, and my ideas, I can make those changes. Things flash in your head, I'm sure, with your writing, and you say, "I could do this in another way, and if I do it another way it will be much more effective. The way I am doing it now is just not right, it doesn't work." And so your feelings, how you feel about it, what



you are doing, must enter the picture.

SMITH: Well, why else would you be writing it?

LEWIS: That's right. You go to the library, you look up information, you put down who said what, when and where, and anything that you don't quote you phrase in another way so you can say the same thing. You have a good documentation of the person and his art. And everything else is an opinion.

SMITH: Well, everyone's entitled to an opinion.

LEWIS: But opinions aren't usually factual, they are usually based on your mood and your ideas and so forth.

SMITH: When you were dealing with students, what did you want from them? Did you want an argument?

LEWIS: I always told my students from the very beginning that I was going to give them all I could give them from my perspective, from the things I had learned, and if they left my course with no more than that, then they would have not learned anything, because I expected they would use their own minds to assimilate and to digest and to throw out that which did not pertain to their direction. I was more interested in their direction than I was in what I had learned. I want to keep learning, I want to keep understanding. I always told them I expected more of them. I didn't expect them to regurgitate and give me back what I gave them. I did want an occasional argument.





Sometimes I'd say some ridiculous things, and they would write down what I was saying. And I'd say, "Don't you have any questions?" I'd just do that occasionally to see if they were thinking. And many of them were thinking. That's the advantage of working at Claremont, I guess, because we had twelve to twenty-five students per class, so you could sit around the table and you could have discussions. Nobody went to sleep. I wouldn't let them go to sleep. Not because I was so interesting, but when you've got twelve people in a class, nobody's going to go to sleep.

[Tape X, Side One]

SMITH: Your approach stems from your experience, so if you had decided to study French or Italian art history it wouldn't have been that much different, but was there an aspect of the way that Chinese art history had developed, questions that it was asking that led you more easily into certain ways of thinking about art?

LEWIS: I was attracted to Chinese art history by seeing the calligraphy. At that time not too many people saw Chinese calligraphy, because I think that they didn't have it in many museums. But I went to the Freer, and places like that, and I just liked the fluid quality of the movement. I had seen Franz Kline's work, and I think I moved from Kline to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. Really, it was western art that led me into looking at Chinese calligraphy—even some of Jackson Pollock's work. There were quite a few collectors of Chinese art in New York, and in Ohio I was exposed to



Native American art, which in a strange way had some resemblance to some of the Chinese characters that I saw.

When I first started in Chinese art history I was attracted to it because of its proximity to African bronzes and to the pre-Columbian art of west Mexico. I was interested in the calligraphy and the early symbols. The art history part of it really fascinated me because there were distinctive, well-defined periods. It wasn't just a matter of an artist's name, but it was a matter of those things that happened during that time period that really excited me. So I was excited by most of the early periods. When I was teaching Chinese art history, there were so many new discoveries that were coming about. It appealed to me much more than Western art history because it was a chain of moving from one stage to another; there were differences, but there were movements that were related.

In Western art you move from Italy, to France, you've got the early Christians— For me, I like Donatello better than Michelangelo, because he was so well defined. You taught the Renaissance period, or you taught some other period. Western art history is so segmented, whereas Chinese art history is not like that. You might focus one semester on the Tang Dynasty, but generally speaking I had two semesters of Chinese art history, and I was able to move through up to a period and then move from the Tang on.

SMITH: Did you deal with modern Chinese art?



LEWIS: Yes, I did, not very much, though. I didn't have a semester of it, but I did tack it onto the end of the second semester. I have a good collection of slides, because I went to China, and I have Cahill's slides, and Sherman Lee's slides, from the time when I took seminars with them. Then, prior to that, when I went to T'ung Hai University, I was able to have someone photograph the Palace Museum collection. I was among the first Fulbright fellows to study the collection when it was in T'ung Hai, before they built the museum. But I think if I had my choice of what I would teach it would still be Chinese art history. There's a fluid quality about it. Of course the Sung pottery and all of that is just amazing to me; it's so subtle yet so beautiful. And I especially liked the scholar painters who didn't paint like scholars at all; they painted very free, and scholars usually aren't that free, in the Western sense. At one time most of my friends were Chinese, and even though they spoke Cantonese, we did a lot of things together.

SMITH: Was your Chinese art history class chronologically organized?

LEWIS: Right. I got the impression that that was one of my best classes, and that my students were excited about it. You know, you pass out these little questionnaires, asking how the students felt about the course, and I got the impression that it was my most successful venture.

SMITH: Did you also teach it on the graduate level?

LEWIS: No, I didn't teach on the graduate level. I taught humanities at Scripps, and





above the humanities level I taught art history. When I was at Scripps we had a two-year humanities program. They didn't have any art history at all, really. They had artists come in and give lectures, but I do not believe that any art history courses were offered in the graduate school. Some of the graduate students would come over and take undergraduate art history courses.



SESSION SIX: 18 JUNE, 1997

[Tape XI, Side One]

SMITH: To start off, I wanted to ask if you had anything further you wanted to say from yesterday, if anything had popped into your mind that you felt needed amplification or clarification?

LEWIS: There was something that I wanted to talk about. I haven't forgotten it, but with all the running around I've been doing, it's not in the forefront of my thoughts.

SMITH: Well, if it comes up.

LEWIS: I'll think about it, it'll come back.

SMITH: You didn't write exactly the first book on African American art, but since you started out, African American art has found a place within the academy, so that in most major universities the art history departments will have hired somebody to cover it. There are now a number of texts that are available by various authors, with different perspectives. I wonder what your thinking is on the state of African American art history. What are the major questions that still remain to be addressed, and has getting some kind of recognition in the academy been beneficial in some ways but not in others?

LEWIS: Well, it's interesting that the first accomplishment that Ruth Waddy and I made was with *Black Artists on Art*, volume one in particular. We tracked what happened after that book was published and we found that of the people who were



featured in it, eleven of them were hired in junior colleges or four-year colleges and universities, and that, to us, was quite remarkable. They were able to use that publication as something that was respected, and even though it wasn't a great publication, at least they were in a hard-cover book, something that really had not been done in that way before, where the artists were speaking for themselves, and it was a contemporary approach.

But after that I think the magazine [*Black Art: An International Quarterly*] did more to help African American artists find jobs and get promotions. We deliberately made it a slick magazine; we didn't want it to look like just an old sheet, you know. Of course we wouldn't have let it look like that anyway; we wanted it to be on good paper, fine type, really a good looking publication. It cost us dearly, but it paid off for artists, and I think that the quarterly did more than the books to expose their art. It also assisted a number of writers, who were able to use their published works for promotions. No one could deny that it was a valid and respectable magazine. The research was there, and so was the documentation.

The later books, for instance, the one I did for Harcourt, Brace [*Art: African American*] probably enhanced the careers of studio artists rather than people in academia. I guess the most important push was in terms of what happened to Elizabeth Catlett. After I did the book on her, Elizabeth became better known in this country. Before the book people such as Noah [Purifoy] would say to me, "Am I





supposed to know her?" When she came to visit with me I took her to Claremont and I introduced her to Los Angeles artists like Noah and took her to their studios. Noah had never really heard of Elizabeth Catlett. She left here in 1947 and didn't return for any length of time until the sixties, or seventies. She came for a visit in the sixties, but nobody recognized her.

SMITH: I remember hearing about her in the sixties; maybe that's just because of the circles I ran in.

LEWIS: Yes, but Noah didn't know her; very few of the African American artists knew her. Alonzo Davis knew her, but he was one of the very few. She was collected in this country by people who were not African Americans. Her work was in important collections. The left wing crowd, especially, adored her. But I think that single volume helped. That was one of the first volumes of that magnitude on an individual African American artist, and that really propelled her career. It's incredible that somebody like Richard Hunt doesn't have such a book. He's asked me to do something on him. Jake Lawrence has a book, but it's not of the magnitude and presentation that Elizabeth's book is. We had her name embossed on the linen covered hardcovers.

SMITH: Did you have a hard time convincing the publisher that this was necessary?

LEWIS: I didn't have a hard time doing what I finally did. Abrams was interested, I told you that. And then at that same time we were fortunate that the New Orleans



Museum of Art was presenting her show. I had talked to [E.] John Bullard about her. We were also fortunate that the Museum of African American Art was being established. So with the combination of what the New Orleans Museum was doing, the Hancraft Studios, and the Museum of African American Art, it was possible for us to do the book. There was not a major publisher for that book. We didn't try anybody else. After Abrams came on with that nonsense about cleaning it up, we decided that most of the white presses would have that same attitude, so why waste time? Now, we could have gone to Ward Ritchie, in Pasadena, because he was very open-minded, but he did smaller editions; we didn't even try him. A man who owned the largest advertising agency in the state of California, Ralph Carson, got financial backing for us, interest free, so we could do *Black Artists on Art* and other publications.

SMITH: And what was their goal?

LEWIS: They checked us out, came to see what we were doing and what we wanted to do, and because of Ralph Carson—I don't know what kind of deal he had with them—they didn't ask anything; they wanted us to pay them back, interest free, a percentage of the sales.

SMITH: So if you hadn't sold anything they would have been out?

LEWIS: Yes. I'm trying to think of the name of the company. Shareholder's, Inc. I don't think it was a regular corporation, I think it was founded to do things of that



sort. They were probably non-profit.

SMITH: Now you were a group of people who were operating around the magazine.

LEWIS: Right.

SMITH: How did you find them, or how did they find you? And how did you make decisions?

LEWIS: Did I tell you about the gallery that we had on Redondo?

SMITH: Yes, called The Gallery.

LEWIS: The Gallery. Okay. That was when I was studying Chinese language at USC, maybe it was after, but I met David and Suzy Wong, and Jerry Manpearl; there were about seven people all together. We wanted to be multi-racial, and multi-cultural, and each of us put in a thousand dollars.

SMITH: Yes, you mentioned that, for the gallery, right?

LEWIS: Right. But after that, people like Bert Hammond came in, and Mary Jane Hewitt, and my sister Millie; it took only three of us to incorporate the museum. But I didn't have any problem getting people to join us and put money up in terms of becoming a part of what it took to incorporate and to get things going. Mary Jane Hewitt was very helpful. She had resigned from Occidental College, and I just approached her and said, "Well, you don't have anything to do now, so why don't you come and work with me?" I knew her from some time ago, and I knew that she knew about African American art because she circulated the first African American art





show in the UC system. She had James Porter working on it, so she had background and experience and it wasn't difficult to pull her into this project.

I pulled in anybody that I saw I could work with and I thought could contribute to the whole thing. I had a student from Pomona College who worked closely with me on typing and doing various things for the book, and whatever I needed. I think he's a lawyer now. I just used those resources; Claremont hired students to be assistants. They knew that they were going to work on some of those projects with me.

SMITH: Was it run like a collective? How were you organized together to educate each other and discuss what needed to be done?

LEWIS: We had meetings, people had assigned roles, in terms of who was going to do what. David Simolke, one of my ex-students from Long Beach State, was the installer, and my sister Mildred kept the office, and David Wong was the cameraman, and the two of us edited. Paul kept the books. Suzy didn't do too much, but she was delightful to be around. [laughter] Jerry Manpearl was our attorney. We had a pretty good organization. People like Bernie Casey came in to help us and do whatever he could do, he would speak, and of course the ladies would come out to listen to him and buy art. So we had a great deal of community help, too. Some of my students would come and do whatever they could do, and use it as a sort of training program, or workshop. So it was a big community. And John Outterbridge



helped us a lot. And Claude . . . from the Black Art Council? I saw his wife the other day.

SMITH: I know who you're talking about, Cecil Fergerson and Claude Booker?

LEWIS: Claude Booker, yeah. Then I had a friend, she's deceased now, who would do a lot of writing of proposals for us and help us in that way. We were not non-profit, but our proposals were funneled through Claremont University Center, through non-profit conduits.

SMITH: So you tried to be able to operate both ways, so if you could make a profit, fine.

LEWIS: Right. One reason we had to move the museum out is because the museum was non-profit, and we had it adjacent to a whole for-profit complex, so legally we couldn't do that. So fortunately Mary Jane was instrumental in finding the place at the May Company for us to move into. First we moved to Santa Monica, into a little space. Then she went to a party one evening with another person, and the May Company real estate person was there and asked the question, "How would you like to move into one of our spaces?" I had been to Japan and I had seen art places in department stores, and I was always pleased about that and amazed at the same time that such would be the case. So I said, "Well, if they can do it in Japan then we can do it here too, especially for free." But no, I never had difficulty getting people to work with me. I sometimes had difficulty staying with the project myself, because I



wanted to move on to something else. I could organize it and get it going, but if I had to stay with it too long—except for the magazine, because the magazine was ever-changing—then I wasn't in favor of that.

SMITH: The magazine also allowed you to explore a whole lot of things that you might not have gotten to otherwise.

LEWIS: Right, absolutely. It was just the right time for that magazine, and it made a big difference in terms of the African American art community, and the art community *for* African Americans.

SMITH: In the eighties, art history became very theoretically redirected. How did you feel about that and did you see there being a place for that kind of thinking in terms of the areas of art that interested you?

LEWIS: Keep this in mind, that in 1982, '83 I was on a Ford Foundation grant in the South and in the Caribbean. In 1984 I left academia, so I didn't go through much of the 1980s in an institution of higher learning. By that time I was ready to leave.

[laughter] And I left.

SMITH: Okay. I think you are answering the question. The phrase that you have used in your writing is to "look at the art without presuppositions," which is something that actually much contemporary art history can't do. It's operating assumptions are that you have to read into it.

LEWIS: Did I mention that the interesting thing about all the articles I've read on





Colescott, in so-called major newspapers or magazines, is that they always start with who influenced him and who he studied with, but they never do that with Roy Lichtenstein, or any of these other people. I cannot see why they don't just begin with his work, and not try to see somebody else in it. Why does he have to be the person who's following in the footsteps of somebody that he's probably long since forgotten about?

SMITH: Maybe because it validates him as not being "intuitive."

LEWIS: I think so, I think so. But I haven't see that happen in terms of most artists of European descent, I have not seen that happen. They don't write about them that way. And maybe they don't even know who he is, so they have to find some way to say something; that's another point, though. There was a book out, by Elsa Fine [*The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity*]. It's about African American artists, but she preceded any information on the artists by talking about a Western artist. You don't know about that book?

SMITH: No, I don't know that book. You mentioned it before.

LEWIS: I have a copy of it someplace. But that was my real criticism of that book. She had some beautiful photographs and presentations, but the content, the way she approached the artists and the works, had to be through European eyes; I guess that's all she knew.

SMITH: It's the voice of Europe listening to itself, right?



LEWIS: Right. I was talking to my son Claude about what's happening; I think I showed you that invitation the other day, with derogatory images that were painted by Michael Ray Charles, an African American artist.

SMITH: Oh, yes.

LEWIS: Claude said he's not surprised at the great support that these kinds of things are getting. It's following the same pattern as the music; they kept the gangsta rap and got rid of all the positive rap. They put in the money and pushed gangsta rap to the young people, but they let the other die.

SMITH: Rap music apparently is getting passé now, but a few years ago, three quarters of the people who bought rap music were suburban teenagers, mostly white.

LEWIS: I know, but the message still is one where it creates fear of other people.

SMITH: It creates a fear and black art becomes a vehicle for white people to express their own rebellion without having to do anything.

LEWIS: Right. It's like Harlem again, huh? It's like the clubs in Harlem in the twenties and thirties, where whites could go and jam and dance and do all kinds of things. They couldn't do it downtown, and they couldn't do it in their homes, but they could go to Harlem and hear those people and spice up their life a little bit.

SMITH: Well, these are the contradictions; as you enter into an international market, the original experiences become less important.

LEWIS: Yes, sure.



SMITH: And there's a way in which the artist and the communities they come from get reduced to just simple-minded symbols , so it's all part of that dehumanization and brutalization.

LEWIS: And then they become the *primitive* part of the whole situation, the part that has that energy and that lack of discipline; it's interesting. I told you I worked in Florida with this high school group, and I was amazed when I saw the jazz band and there was a black conductor, and all the kids where white; there wasn't a black kid in the group. I wondered about that, so I asked him, "Where are the black kids in terms of jazz?" He said something like, "They don't want to be disciplined." And Dartmouth had a jazz group as well, and all the kids were white. So what I'm saying is that there's a kind of excitement that the white kids found in jazz that they didn't find in any of the other music. However, it relegated jazz to a place that was not as complimentary as it should have been.

I'm as confused about things now as I was twenty years ago, because of course things continually change. I don't think it's a generation gap as much as it is the perspective. You hold on to certain things, I know; I understand that. But in the arts, and the visual arts in particular, we try to keep our minds open for that excitement that will generate something, so you don't have a specific visual in mind. People say, "What are you going to paint?" I don't know, but it certainly comes out of something that you've held on to, and going different places and seeing different





people allows you to augment and to contribute a different perspective or point of view to what you had held close to you in the past. But I'm pretty confused, because there are so many things that are happening now, and more than fifty per cent of them seem to be negative things. I'm sure there are a lot of problems out there, but— At one time my real concern was police brutality, we'll say, but it's gone beyond police brutality to just sheer brutality. There's so much brutality out there that you almost don't want to focus on it, because you have to be honest about who's being brutal to whom. There might be reasons . . . we claim poverty, and a lot of things, but if you go to certain communities where people are really poor—

I know the Brazilian government is one of the worst in the world in terms of lack of democracy, brutality, and lack of fair treatment of people, but you find these people living in poor communities, and they're clean, they respect each other, they live together. I'm talking about people of color doing this, not whites and blacks living together, but people of color. They're not killing each other. They're surrounded by poverty, but I don't think poverty is the single contributing factor, you know. I think there's some kind of exposure. There is a print I made called *Southern Exposé*. A lot of times people give us things that will help us destroy ourselves, and this could be for poor people, this could be for black people, this could be for white people in Appalachia; it doesn't matter.

There's something about that that really has pushed me to the brink of saying,



"What *can* we do?" What can we do as artists to help change these kinds of situations? You can't do it unless you can inform people. You can't do it just by making pretty pictures and enlightening them, you've got to inform them. How do you inform them? This is where education comes in, and then people say, "Well, education is a slow process." But it's slower than it has to be. We've got to write books, we've got to train teachers, and there's the whole academic situation, where they're holding on to the status quo.

SMITH: Or trying to roll things back.

LEWIS: Or trying to roll things back. The responsibility is really greatly on their heads, you know? It's sad, and when you say that, then people say, "Oh, you've got a chip on your shoulder and you're just being difficult," and so forth and so on.

SMITH: But in the forties, when you were a student, art tended to be more positive in its approach. It didn't necessarily always have a definite social message, but there was a sense of dignity and uplift.

LEWIS: Some of it was, but some of the Hale Woodruff prints were not so positive, and John Biggers was doing work in the forties of lynchings. There were some things that were not so positive. Charles White did positive images, we'll say. But there were a lot of people in the South who did depictions of real poverty. Those works that probably came forth and were exhibited were positive images, but there were artists who were making things that reacted in terms of the lynchings and the killings.



I think I showed you the book that I did of images from the bayou, yes I did, and one of them is a man holding a cake of ice, trying to preserve it. Well, that to me was symbolic of life, of some degree of happiness, but that man is not happy, he's fearful. So I was doing things of that sort, and most of my work was that way; it wasn't really happy. And John Biggers was doing things that way. We were not taught to make nice pictures. There were a number of us who were really serious about our works.

There were people like James Porter, who did positive images. I went to see a James Porter art exhibit at Howard, and his self-portrait was the darkest person in his paintings; the rest of them were glorified mulatto types. When Aaron Douglas stopped painting his silhouettes of African figures, and slavery, and things of that sort, he went on to paint portraits like *Molly*, and other people who were dignified. I think that was a pre-integration period, where people wanted to be like everybody else, and "everybody else" was not black people, necessarily. That was that whole period of color-consciousness—like being "light," and the bleach, and all of that. So it's been very difficult to try as an artist to reach a population where things will make a difference. Because now people are talking about collecting for profit.

SMITH: But that's how an artist survives if he or she doesn't have a job teaching somewhere.

LEWIS: I know, but I'm saying that the collectors are not collecting. They don't want things that might challenge them in their homes, and the artist suffers. So, the





artist makes "nice things."

SMITH: But there is a whole stream of collectors who want things that are ugly. We mentioned Peter Norton before.

LEWIS: Yeah, I know.

SMITH: Or provocative.

LEWIS: Provocative, let's put it that way. But I think the general run of collectors, the people that the artists can depend on, simply don't want to be challenged. So where does that place the artist? That's another issue, you see. That places the artist in the position of either having to go and get a job someplace doing something else, or compromising in terms of what will sell. That's the case with most artists, not just African American, but it's more so with African American artists.

I was reading this survey of who buys art. You know who buys most art?

Well, women, number one. Number two, the average teacher. Not the professional doctor or the lawyer—they buy the least amount. Most college graduates buy art, but also those who are employed as teachers buy art. Their average income is somewhere between \$25,000 and \$45,000, and they pay on time.

SMITH: That's interesting.

LEWIS: I don't know why I'm saying all of this, but I think that before, there was a dilemma for artists in terms of not being able to show in galleries; they had to practically give away their work. I'm sure that Jacob Lawrence gave away his



*Migration* series. But now there's this whole thing of creating a market, and most of the African American market now is with the white community. Except for people like Bill Cosby.

SMITH: Some of that is just demographics. If eighty percent of the middle class is white, that would make sense. But obviously it doesn't seem that you were operating with the assumption that you could change the whole system. With your magazine and your books and the gallery, and your consulting, you chip away at things.

LEWIS: Right, and I always said generally what I wanted to say—my mother was fearful sometimes. I didn't write necessarily what I wanted to say, but I frequently said what I wanted to say. If I couldn't, I stayed away from people. But I guess because I did that, I was able to go to places like Scripps, where I was able to have that seminar with Alice Walker and Maya Angelou and Kenny Burrell, and do things of that sort, because I guess they didn't know what else to do with me. I taught Chinese art history, but after that they didn't know what else to do with me. I persisted and was able to get the money from them to do things that for a long time they didn't pay much attention to.

After a while I was the only one doing those sorts of things, so I had my own kind of academy going. They had ignored it, and then it began to blossom and students began to come into it and started talking like I was talking. And these were rich kids. So they'd go home to their mothers and fathers, who'd say, "What are you



talking about, black art?" They thought it was some kind of mysterious thing, like what was going around in Haiti, like something they had seen on television. So I was able to chart my own course and do my own thing, and was freer to do it for insisting that I be allowed to do it. I didn't have to compromise. I don't think I would have, I just would have maybe been fired, but I wouldn't have compromised. And that really opened doors for me, and that was certainly something extremely worthwhile.

[Tape XI, Side Two]

SMITH: What were you looking at in your research in Fiji? You had mentioned that you were looking for a relationship to Tanzania.

LEWIS: Right, right. I was also looking at the Pescadores Islands and I was trying to make some connections between that whole movement from Africa to Asia. I was trying to make some connection to Tanzania, of course, but also the entire African connection. I wanted to use not only works in the museum that they had in Fiji, but also works that they had in the Smithsonian and places like that. We were trying to organize a major exhibition, so we went into the basements of the Met and pulled out the works and examined the works. This was funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

SMITH: Did you go out of the city to look at how the objects operated in people's daily lives?

LEWIS: Right, absolutely.





SMITH: How did you go about documenting that? Was it photographs, or video?

LEWIS: Photographs, and audio tapes. We didn't have too many videos at that time, I don't think. I'm sure there were video cameras, but we didn't have one. Val Spaulding was with me. We started the project because Val's husband worked for Pan Am, and they traveled to Fiji and met some of the people there who were Queens scholars, and people of that sort, and she knew the museum people there. So that's how I got started. And along with me was a woman from UC San Diego, an art historian, Jehanne Teilhet, and there was an anthropologist from Toronto. So Val and I went to Fiji; the other two did not go, but we met at the University of Hawaii and came together in terms of conferences. But we did a lot of documentation. We were more interested in the artifacts, and things of that sort.

SMITH: You could look at them and see formal relationships to African art?

LEWIS: Oh, absolutely.

SMITH: Were they being used in the same way? Were they being integrated in a practical, spiritual way in people's lives?

LEWIS: They were, outside of the cities. In the cities, yes, but in a very limited way. And it was like going into Paramaribo, in Surinam, and then going to the bush; you had to get out of the cities. I have been invited, by the way, to come back to Fiji and to continue my research. Since they had their uprising they want somebody to come in and continue the documentation and to help them with establishing their art history.



SMITH: Do you think you'll do it?

LEWIS: Well, I have the letter and my friend Jimi Lee is the one who's pulling it together. I probably will do it. Not this year.

SMITH: What about Surinam? What led you there? You mentioned off-tape that you had five years of documentation from there. What were you specifically assembling in your Surinam work?

LEWIS: For me, and I think the documentation shows this, Surinam is more African than most of Africa now; in terms of its ceremonies, its music, its dance, even its utensils, it's authentically African. I wanted to go there and document a sort of Africa in the Americas. Of course it's in South America, but it identifies with the Caribbean. I wanted to find out how the people maintained their Africanisms, and since they were from different cultures, how they were able to live together. They're not all of the same culture, you see. They were basically people from Ghana and people from Nigeria—those are the two major areas that they came from. They were of course being brought as slaves, and they jumped the slave ship and became known as the Bush Negroes. There were medicines that I was interested in, and of course the spiritual ceremonies, the dances, the clothing. It was the place where I found that the elders danced first, and then the younger people, progressively, according to age, were allowed to dance. And they talked to me about mental telepathy, communicating with their people in Africa, and how they could do this, and how they



knew and remembered so much about Africa, and they had the old men telling stories. Of course that's part of passing on the information. I don't know if you ever saw that film that Alcoa was practically forced to do; Jimi Lee encouraged them to finance it. It's called *I Shall Molder Before I Shall Be Taken*, which is very much like the old spiritual, "Before I'll Be a Slave I Shall Be Buried in My Grave."

Surinam was like discovering Africa for me. Some people would go to Haiti, but Surinam was not like Haiti. It was healthy, with thriving communities—there were the Saramakas and the Djukas—and these people were self-sufficient. It was really quite something, it was really wonderful. I almost moved to Surinam. I get so excited about these places. And the houses were works of art. Before a man could marry he had to build a house for his intended bride, so she could keep her utensils and things in it, and if necessary go and stay there. They had symbolism like the Zulus. I have some of the gourds back there which have scratched in designs; if you had something unpleasant to say to somebody you did not verbalize it, you would put it on the gourd and offer it to them. If your wife or your husband decides that you're not being fair, then they can put it in the gourd and tell you what they think of you. So it's a very symbolic culture. The doors and the doorways themselves are extremely wonderful works of art, and the boats are magnificent. You wouldn't believe it, but I was able to get a boat, and I was able to get two houses. They brought them out for me, and they were flown to Miami and later flown to Pomona





for an exhibit at the county fair.

SMITH: So they're at the museum?

LEWIS: No, I did a major exhibit in Puerto Rico about Africa and the Caribbean basin, and [Hurricane] Hugo blew them away. They were at the museum in San Juan. The hurricane blew the top off the building and blew the doors open and destroyed most of what was in there. So I don't have those. And you can't go into the interior of Surinam now and get this type of work.

SMITH: No, how come?

LEWIS: The government will not allow you to do that anymore. Some sergeant went out of his mind and invaded the interior and killed a lot of people; it was really bad. The country is still in a state of recovery. But Surinam is one of my favorite places. There are different cultures there and they celebrate each other's cultures once a year. They have one of the oldest theaters in South America. I used to go there for the celebrations and I documented the performances. It was interesting, when the Saramakas would come to Paramaribo for the performances, they were allowed to walk in the middle of the street, because that was like walking down their path, and the people and the cars would just move around them.

SMITH: You also mentioned that you've collected materials on Brazil.

LEWIS: Oh yes, tons of material.

SMITH: What were you looking for there? I mean, this is in addition to the



Afro-Brazilian artists that you were looking into. I guess it's the folk life—

LEWIS: Right. I noticed that most of the books on Brazil were of white Brazilian artists. The Afro-Brazilians were all folk artists, what few that they showed. Now, even though Mestre Didi's work is printed in a book on mysticism from France, the Brazilian government printed a poster of his work and labeled it "unknown Brazilian folk artist." That's how awful they were, and they probably still are.

So I wanted to do something in terms of documenting these artists. I knew about the Afro-Brazilian music, but there was not much that was made available on the Afro-Brazilian visual art community, and that's really what I was looking for. And I was looking for their relationship to not only Africans but to the Amerindians. Instead of the black-white mixture I wanted the Amerindian-black mixture—not necessarily a mixture, but I wanted that kind of influence. Like my friend who did this [pointing to painting]: his mother was from Angola, and his father was Amerindian. Some of these artists had a Christian background, but they also strongly believed in Candomblé. I knew that as it was true with a lot of so-called folk artists, that they were not only visual artists but they were musicians too, samba people. In Rio I would go and sit up all night and listen to and tape the samba people explaining to me the relationship of the samba to their lives; it wasn't just a dance for them, but it was an expression of life. And most of them were also visual artists. So I was interested in artists who not only could see, the visual artists, but had a sensory perception for



the auditory art, the music and the dance. They were almost like complete art forms for me. I went to one of the carnivals in Bahia, where I saw floats made of trash. This was not only a protest but it was an expression of real concern about many, many things, and I was able to document this "happening."

People said, "Well, if the Afro-Brazilians are so powerful spiritually, why don't they do something about their political situation?" When I posed the question to some of my Brazilian friends, they said, "To do something about the political situation you have to become one of them." You can't just go in and kill people, you have to become one of them, and they said though they didn't want to be victimized, they also didn't want to become the people who were doing that to other people. They have moved politically in a positive direction, but it's come slowly.

In the meantime, they've maintained a real substantive and significant culture that's flowing over into the so-called mainstream, and they can't be ignored any longer. It's really interesting that when I go to these places I feel as though I must have been a part of this at some time, I really do. There are some places I go where I have not felt as though I was a part, but when I go to places that tend to have an African kind of flavor I seem to have been there before.

SMITH: When we were talking earlier, before we started taping, you were telling me about a little exchange you had with one of the people from the Getty where you said about these various cultures, "They're all related, you know." That seems to be





something that underlies your philosophical approach.

LEWIS: One of the visiting scholars at the Getty said to me, "We've proven that they're not related." How did they prove it? By ignoring a lot of things. When I was in Taiwan, I went to see the hill people. I think I went with some Jesuit priests. I was amazed. They didn't really want me to leave. They wanted to keep me. We were all dancing, and they were so much like the Plains Indians, the Native Americans. They were tall, and they had chants, and they had these sticks that they were pounding in the ground with and making sounds. They were very similar to things I had seen in this country, when we would take our son to Arizona. They looked just like the Plains Indians. They were called the hill people and they were the aborigines.

I still think that there might be something valid in the Bering Straits theory, you know? We don't know whether the Asians came here, or those who were here went there, or what, but there were too many resemblances, too many things that were similar—the sounds, and everything. Of course I was taught that different things sprang up in different places at different times, because of certain circumstances, and that might be true, but I think there is a common basis in terms of relationships, in terms of races and so forth. I know that a lot of the Mexicans don't want to concede that part of their culture is black. The Japanese certainly don't want to do that, but it is.

SMITH: I was going to ask you, you don't seem to have done a whole lot on



bright people around who could come together and do it—people in different places. The *Caribbean Visions* [exhibit] showed that people are willing. I'm sure there are young scholars out there looking for something to do.

SMITH: There is a lot of work on the African diaspora, as it's oftentimes called now.

LEWIS: But that's not visual arts. I think there's one tiny book out now that deals with parts of the visual arts but it doesn't cover enough, it's just a small book. I'm talking about something that really will have an impact. You can work with the historians, but it ought to be an art history book, I would think.

SMITH: Do you know Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* [: *Modernity and Double Consciousness*]?

LEWIS: No.

SMITH: It's not an art history book, but it's a book about the interaction between Africa, Britain, the Caribbean, the United States, on a cultural-intellectual level.

LEWIS: That's why Mary Jane and I worked really well together, she's a cultural historian, and her major focus is the Caribbean. She was trained really well at the University of Minnesota and did Latin American Studies there. So we worked very well together, but we're both getting tired. [laughter]

SMITH: Well, not too tired I hope!

LEWIS: No, but we're getting tired. It's becoming more difficult every day. We were not fortunate to be funded. I guess our proposals are good but we didn't know



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how to ask for enough money.

SMITH: Too bashful. But also your interests are shifting back towards the easel, and expressing these thoughts visually.

LEWIS: Of course I started out as a visual artist, and it's something I've wanted to do. I have done a lot of prints. Not enough paintings, not enough sculpture. When I paint, I get some release—not relief, but release. I am able to control my blood pressure and think a little more clearly, because I get some things out of me. But I am doing this now for another reason. I'm not doing much in terms of negative images, if you noticed that. I used to. I don't care to do negative images now because I think that the need is for more positive images. I'm not doing it because I want to satisfy somebody else. I can take this image [pointing to a print], and I can take people back in history, with that boy, and the lamp.

SMITH: And the book.

LEWIS: I can take a person back in history and have them wonder. Now, most art critics would say, "Well, it's obvious that it's somebody in a house with a lamp and a book," and so forth and so on. But that's not all; if they keep looking that's not all that they see. They see that in spite of conditions there is still some sort of hope. If this print is in somebody's house, maybe there'll be a hundred people there for a party. Maybe ten of them will look at it and go beyond the surface and say, "I remember." I just want people to begin to recall and to think about things that might have been



important to them other than the money that they're making, other than the cars that they have, other than the promotion that they might get. It's just a little something that I think I can do that's needed.

This painting is going to be children skipping rope when I finish. It's because I remember skipping rope. Those are the kinds of things that I think we have to recall and that we easily forget, things that made a difference in our lives and added some kind of spark to our lives. It's not always the big things, it's the little things. I think we feel that we have to satisfy the art market, so we do the other things. We do things that nobody understands anything about. It's okay, if you want to do that. When I do that, the more abstract things, then it's usually a very pointed kind of thing, and I don't want to engage in that at this point, I really don't want to.

I also think that it doesn't matter what the subject is, the message can be gotten over in many ways. There's nothing wrong with figurative art; it can be art if you do it well. I'm trying to do it well, and I'm trying to say something with it other than what you see; I'm trying to bring back that memory base, you know? That's why I'm doing it. That's the principal reason. You know, selling this is not of any advantage to me anyway, because all it does is get me in tax trouble. [laughter] So I make it because I have to make it, not because I think people buy figurative art and it will sell. And, as I said, frequently it's difficult for me to sell, because I become attached to it, because I'm trying to say something, I'm trying to do something. I



know that doesn't make sense to a lot of people, but so be it, who cares?

SMITH: Well, you're in a different position. Someone who's thirty right now faces a different set of questions.

LEWIS: Well, I was thirty once, and I was doing the same thing. I wasn't painting necessarily figurative things, but I knew that in order to express myself as an artist I had to do other things. I didn't come here doing exactly what I wanted to do as an artist. I had to find a way to make this happen and to give myself the time to do this.

SMITH: Well, for example, your son Claude has been to art school and has developed a profession as a photographer. Now, of course, as a photographer he can always go out and do weddings if he has to, but if he's to establish himself as an art photographer, he has to adapt to a world that has been hostile to everybody and hostile to him in particular.

LEWIS: Right. But I'm trying to help him hold on to his beliefs by giving him all the support I can give him. I know I'm not going to be around all the time to give him support, but I certainly will try to direct him, or help him direct himself in a manner so that he will not have to rely on those people who would reject him and his beliefs. And even though I always joke with him and say, "If you'd told me you wanted to be a Rastafarian I could have saved all that money I paid Pitzer [College] and bought a Rolls Royce or something." Which I wouldn't have done, but we joke about it.

But I guess we're getting to the question of why people do art. Or why they





do music. But I think musicians are purer, in a way, in that they do music because they just have to. When I say musicians, I don't mean classical musicians. They have their little gigs here and there. But artists, when they are serious artists, must have the time and the place; they cannot make a living the same way a musician can. I guess if they wanted to become more commercial they could, but a musician can stay pure and still earn a living by going to clubs where they like jazz, or they like blues, and things of that sort. The artist has to find a way to eat. Unfortunately that support hasn't been there, and still is not really there.

SMITH: It may be even less so.

LEWIS: I know.

SMITH: I don't know if you know about the Heidelberg Project in Detroit? The artist, Tyree Guyton, is about forty or so, and he started by just taking the block that he lived on in east Detroit, and he began building an "artscape."

LEWIS: Oh, yes, they were threatening to tear it down.

SMITH: The previous mayor actually sent in the bulldozers. The current administration is viewing this in a very different way, giving it money. It's expanding, they're going to build a coffeehouse.

LEWIS: Wonderful. I've been through it. I was in Detroit about two years ago I think and my friends took me through it. It's wonderful.

SMITH: He's got about five blocks now.



LEWIS: Oh my, that's great, that's great.

SMITH: So there are things like that, where the arts become a part of the urban fabric.

LEWIS: We used to have one not too far from here, where the kids were drawing on the sidewalk, and . . . it's about seven or eight blocks from here. I did a study on them for Exxon. It was called *Street Art of Black America*. St. Elmore's Village, it's called. It's still there.

SMITH: On St. Elmore?

LEWIS: Yes. It's worth looking at. The houses are decorated and it's real nice. The kids go there on Saturdays and work. It's a good community project. I think one guy's name is Roderick, or something like that. One of them died, but two brothers started it.

SMITH: It's a different conception of art and it's hard for the powers that be to recognize that even if it's not on La Cienega, or in a building on Wilshire, it might still be art. And it might actually even be more valuable in some way.

LEWIS: It's very interesting that when the Los Angeles County Museum refused the Norman Lewises I told you about, they sent a letter saying, "We would like to have an early Norman Lewis." But the ones that they were being offered were from the thirties, and they can't get one much earlier than that. What they were saying was, "We want a figurative Norman Lewis, not an abstract expressionist Norman Lewis."



So what does that mean? Don't they recognize African American artists who did abstractions?

SMITH: Not if it happens too soon.

LEWIS: Yeah, Jackie Avant said that might be the case. It might make them change their minds about certain things, or have to admit to the fact that they were doing it, that Norman was there. It's a complex world, isn't it?

SMITH: Unfortunately in that situation, it's altogether too simple.

LEWIS: I know, I know.





SESSION SEVEN: 20 JUNE, 1997

[Tape XII, Side One]

SMITH: We were going to start out today by discussing the development of the collection that you and Mary Jane Hewitt helped put together for the California African American Museum.

LEWIS: You mean the Museum of African American Art.

SMITH: Oh, okay, we were talking [off-tape] about the Palmer Haydens?

LEWIS: The Palmer Haydens are at the Museum of African American Art.

The California African American Museum is a state museum.

SMITH: Right, okay.

LEWIS: This is the private, non-profit one on Crenshaw, which preceded the other one by at least a year. Of course museums must have collections to qualify as being museums. I started out by working, begging, and pleading with Nancy Hanks to allow some funds from the National Endowment for the Arts to help amass a collection. The Endowment had money to add to or start up collections, and the state of California also had moneys at that time—we're talking about '76 and '77. So I applied to both the federal government and the state for moneys to buy works. And I bought some very good prints by Hale Woodruff, and I bought some works by Floyd Coleman. I was trying to mix the Harlem Renaissance people with more contemporary artists. We were able to collect about seventy-eight pieces of really



high quality kinds of African American art. The museum was actually born out in Claremont; I applied for moneys to buy works through the Claremont University Center. Then when we moved out of Claremont we continued to beg for money to buy works for the museum.

We found that people were not only receptive to what we were trying to do, but a number of them made works available to the museum. In some cases they had works that they might have given to a church and the church didn't show them, so they decided they might as well give them to a museum, where they could at least be visible part of the time. So in that way we were able to acquire about three very fine paintings by Hale Woodruff—from one collector. We made it known that we didn't collect papers and we didn't collect photographs—unless they were [James] Van Der Zees, or somebody like that. But we did collect paintings, prints, and sculptures. We also wanted a very fine African collection that Howard Smith, an African American artist, had purchased in Europe, really wonderful things, at least fifteen or twenty pieces. He wanted to sell the collection. He couldn't give it to us because he was earning his living as an artist and he needed money. So we were able to get Joan Palevsky to buy that collection for us. And it's a wonderful collection. Joan was on our board—of course we purposely put somebody with money on the board. And people like Maya Angelou and others who could draw people in and who had a certain amount of respectability in the visual arts, literature, or performance fields.



People like that could help us find money, and donors. We didn't really begin any serious collecting until we got to the May Company. By the time we were in our third year, we had at least thirty-five or forty pieces that had been donated or that we had purchased.

The major collection that we were able to get came on the recommendation of Benny Andrews, who was on a board for the Palmer Hayden collection; he was advising Mrs. Hayden. She was moving to Joshua Tree to be with her niece, and she wanted some visibility for her husband's collection, and so the collection was moved. He didn't sell very much. African Americans didn't buy his work. He was one of those park painters and he traveled throughout the United States painting and he did a lot of painting in Maine, but he didn't sell; he had to work to earn a living. Of course his wife was a professor, and I guess part of his survival depended on her. But we were able to get that collection because we worked it out so that we would not only show the collection once a year at the museum, but we would travel it whenever possible, and we would have it restored. We were given fifty-five pieces from the Palmer Hayden collection, fifty-five of the best of his works, including those that had been published, like the *Mid-Summer Night in Harlem*, *Fétiche et Fleurs*, *Marcus Garvey Parade*, and his country scenes and cityscapes. Most of them were at least thirty by forty inches or larger. The *Marcus Garvey* is smaller, but it's among the most beautiful of the works. And the agreement was that if the museum folded or





didn't continue, then we had to pass them on to another non-profit institution, a museum in particular. But they're still at the Museum of African American Art. I think they're traveling now. TRW paid to travel them and produce a catalog, so that's out there.

Then, in addition to that, Mary Jane and I both had collections. I had some very nice Zulu works, and Mary Jane had some Haitian and Jamaican pieces, and we signed those over to the museum, to help diversify. And then when Richmond Barthé died, he left a will requesting that the things from his studio should go to the museum. And so those works are there. I would say, with the African work, the major works by Palmer Hayden and Hale Woodruff, the [Romare] Beardens, the Barthés, and the Catletts, the museum has one of the strongest African American collections in the country. Limited in terms of the number of artists, but that's okay.

I always kept myself out of the collection, so they don't have any of my work. I guess one reason I haven't shown as much as I probably could have is because I never thought you could really foster the works of other artists and at the same time look out for yourself. It's not to me a proper thing to do—seeking a place for yourself instead of doing what you said you would do.

SMITH: Now, you could do that because you have organizational skills and you have also had a university connection which gave you resources.

LEWIS: Right. Somehow people began to see me . . . I just had a call about the



Barnett-Aden Collection; it's available for sale. People call and ask me to put a value on it, you know what I'm saying? I said I haven't seen it in three years and I know I didn't see the entire collection, so there's no way. I would not even attempt to do that without further investigation, and I wouldn't do it anyway, because I don't do that; I'm not an appraiser. But they still think I'm supposed to know, because they see me as a person who sets values, who makes the market. I don't know how that happened, but if I say it's worth twenty or thirty thousand dollars then that's what it's worth. I don't know how that happened, because that's not what I've been doing, but I have been publishing a magazine, and the people who get in the magazine seem to fare well. Some of them, not all of them.

I had another call, from a man in New York. He wanted me to price some John Biggers works for him. I almost said, "Why don't you call John Biggers?" But I didn't. Some of the pieces were thirty years old, some of them are published in books. But I would say that in terms of historical value that the Museum of African American Art has the finest collection. They certainly have more and better works of Palmer Hayden than the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture]. They have more and better works of people of that period, like Hale Woodruff, than the Studio Museum in Harlem. I don't think the Studio Museum has a really major collection. They're beginning now to collect more, but the museum here has the best of the pick so far, and that in itself is kind of remarkable.



SMITH: Of course it's not publicized as much as other museums.

LEWIS: No, you call them and they will not even return your call. They don't have a director now, and they don't have a curator. People have to be very careful about what kind of board they get. I think too many people were put on there for their ability to attract money and not their knowledge of anything other than that. Most of the people on the board are there because it looks good on their vitas and it helps them with their job in terms of community participation, but they know very little. They don't know that you really should have a director and you should have a curator. They might know it, but they don't put forth much effort to get those positions filled; they are not interviewing for them or anything of that sort.

It's not that they can't get the money. They can get the money, but the people who are qualified and who really come for the few interviews that I've seen them conduct frighten them because they are learned people; they challenge them. The board members don't know what the heck they are talking about most of the time. They simply don't know enough about art, art history, art appreciation, art education, call it anything. They have a person over there who is a graduate of Claremont, Douglas Humble, who goes in and out. He's sort of a registrar, to keep things organized for them. If you really want to see anything in there you have to call him. But people outside don't know that. He's the only really competent person in terms of art in that museum.





Mary Jane and I decided after ten years that we couldn't deal with it any longer, because we had to fight too many people, and it was destroying us. So, after ten years of our help and struggling, with no pay—not that we had to have pay, it would have been nice, but—we felt that it was time that we bowed out and let it sink or swim. It's sort of just edging along on the brink of disaster now. Every now and then they have a show; it's not high quality things anymore, it's what *they* like. It has nothing to do with what ought to be shown, and has nothing to do with benefiting from the real opportunities that they have in terms of free space and free everything, you know? Somebody with adequate knowledge of anything about art could really do marvelous things there. They need some professional, trained help. Someone cannot just go in there and say, "I'm going to be the director of this museum."

They have had a couple of people who were really highly qualified. One woman was from Cal State LA. She was head of black studies, and she had a Ph.D. from UCLA. Her name was Mikelle Fletcher I think when she was at UCLA. She did her Ph.D. under Arnold Rubin; it was on African American art, with some relationship to Brazilian culture. In Seattle, when they had the World's Fair there, she forced the organizers to have an African American pavilion, and she collected the art for that. She's also a painter, a community person, and of course a scholar. So she had the whole thing, but she frightened them, because I guess they thought she would challenge them and make them work a little harder. But she really wanted that job, to



be the director of that museum. She went to the University of Arizona, and she's a full professor now in the art history department. I think she's still doing black studies, because that's what she's primarily interested in.

SMITH: Did you have any involvement with consulting, or otherwise helping the California African American Museum Foundation acquire its collection?

LEWIS: Well, in the beginning I worked with Yvonne Burke to help them set up that museum, and Aurelia Brooks came in a bit later. As I said before, the idea was not to have two separate museums, but Yvonne said the state would fund a history museum only, not an art museum. So it was supposed to be a history and culture museum in the beginning, and it was only when Aurelia became involved that the art came into it. The idea was to join hands with the Museum of African American Art, which would be the art *component*, and we would decrease our board and put a few members on their board, and they would do the same thing. The problem with that was that the governor was appointing at least half of their board, so they couldn't drop those members.

Then we had some people on our board who said, "Look, unless they're really serious we do not want the state of California to acquire these collections." So there was a little problem. But when we wanted to meet, Aurelia did not come to the meetings, and she was the person who was then in charge of that museum. So what I did, instead of joining the two museums, I served as curator for the first three art



shows and did the catalogs for them. I was sort of like a special consultant and I worked with them. So I did try, but the whole idea of joining the two museums simply did not work because most of the people who were tied to our museum, like Maya and others, did not want to be controlled by the state.

SMITH: Did you have any involvement with the Golden State Mutual [Life Insurance Company] art collection?

LEWIS: I know Bill Pajaud. I think it's really admirable, what he's done in terms of that collection and those murals. Of course, some of that was done probably before he came, I'm not sure.

SMITH: Well, they started it, but I think he really is the one who guided it.

LEWIS: Right, and I think the workers there, the staff people, paid for the founder's bust that Barthé did. Golden State did not pay for that; they collected money from secretaries and people of that sort; that's what Pajaud told me.

SMITH: Oh, interesting.

LEWIS: That's also written up in Barthé's papers. But Bill has really put aside a lot of his desires to continue as an artist in order to work with that program, and also to work with the program that they had at Otis, for students to work with people like Charles White and so forth.

SMITH: This is a problem, because in effect, you had to put your art aside for a good twenty, or twenty-five years. And Bill Pajaud had to put his art aside. I think





of John Outterbridge, also.

LEWIS: John Outterbridge, yeah. He had to put his aside for quite a long while too.

SMITH: All three of you, and I'm sure there are many others, were forced to make a choice between doing the art, which is really the contribution you have to make, versus the sort of immediate nitty-gritty organizing, which has also got to be done.

LEWIS: Absolutely. What I have managed to do, and I still do it this way, is when I write, when I work on something like that, I write like I paint. I try to use the language in a somewhat professional manner, but there are times when I really don't care about following the rules. So I try to express myself in an honest fashion. I read a lot of things, but anything that doesn't stay with me, I don't go back and research and see who said what at this point. I do that if I use it. But my writing is as creative as my painting. I was criticized at one time by Jay Saunders Redding. I don't know if you know of him; he was teaching at Cornell, but I met him at Hampton. He was so into Shakespeare and Chaucer and people like that that he even spoke Chaucerian. We didn't know what the heck he was talking about, of course. But he told me at one time that I was very good with my writing, very creative, I had ideas . . . if I could just learn some English. It was this kind of thing, you know, but his English would have been stifling to me and to what I was trying to say.

What I am really saying is that I transferred some of my creativity, that expression, to my writing. I don't feel as though I really deprived myself of what I see



as the main facet or the main focus of who I am. I still maintain a certain amount of creativity within myself and my ideas, and I didn't allow technique to kill that off. I have a lot of information that Barthé left and he gave to me, but I use it only insofar as I can build on it. So I really transferred some of those ideas and the spirit of what I felt into my writing. I used to write poetry also, when I was at Hampton.

SMITH: Yes, you mentioned that.

LEWIS: I think that was important to me because I guess it was then that I started saying things in a literary way. When I was at Hampton I would go to the plays, and dances and performances. I'll never forget when Zora Neale Hurston came to Hampton, and I listened to her. I would go to all of these kinds of things, and they all motivated and stimulated me. I didn't paint what I saw, but I was inspired by these people. I was inspired by just seeing Dinah Washington. I didn't realize at the time that she was younger than most of the Hampton students when she was there. When I looked at her birth date in one of the books that I have, and I said, "Wow, this woman was younger than most of us in the college." And when Duke Ellington came he introduced his *Black, Brown and Beige Symphony* there. I never forgot that. These are the kinds of things that I encountered that were part of my bringing together what I later wrote about and painted about, but I didn't paint these things directly.

SMITH: What have you done in terms of identifying private collections that need to



be taken care of? I'm thinking, for instance, of Miriam Mathews. There are lots of collections of varying sizes in people's homes that could go on the market or they could be donated.

LEWIS: Miriam Mathews gave part of her collection to Cal State Dominguez. I'm working with her nephew on cataloging the works. She moved to the state of Washington. She's in a senior citizen complex there, very beautiful I understand, but her nephew is closing down her house, and he wants me to work with him in terms of cataloging and deciding where the collection should go. So I am working with that.

There are people in San Antonio, a doctor and his wife, who have a major collection; they have been collecting about fifteen years. They have really quite a fine collection. I work with them in terms of advising them on purchasing. But they will eventually give their works to a museum, to probably San Antonio Museum. I have talked with Jacob Lawrence. I went to Jake's house in Seattle and his basement was just filled with works of art, and I said, "Now, all you have to do here is to have a break in your water line and you've lost all of this, you know." Jake and Gwen have no relatives, really. He has some nieces and nephews. Most of the collection belongs to Gwen. So I talked to her about possibly giving long term loans to one of the major museums so that those works could be protected and not picked off, or damaged. So I don't know. They were thinking about it. I don't know what's going to happen. It's getting a little late, because they are in their eighties now.





I'm very suspicious about what's still in this Barnett-Aden Collection. I think the best part of that collection has been sold off anyway. Lois [Mailou] Jones says her best pieces that were in the collection are no longer there. The last time I saw that collection the paintings were overrestored; they were covered with coats of varnish. There were some problems with that collection, in that a lot of the artists were not paid. Elizabeth is still foaming at the mouth because they had her pieces on loan and when they closed the gallery they didn't return them. And they cast the Barthé piece that they had and made a good thousand pieces, so it's suspect.

I don't know if you know Leon Banks. He's going to retire, and he wants to place his collection. I had thought of Hampton, but Banks wants his collection to be somewhere where it can be more visible. I'd say a fourth of his collection is artists of European descent, and I have not seen most of the African American museums showing works of that sort. So, what should he do? He's got Klines, and he's got wonderful contemporary African American art, too. But he wants the whole collection to go. So I recommended the Corcoran. The Los Angeles County Museum probably wouldn't want them, because even though his Klines are probably as good as those they have, they probably wouldn't want the works by the African American artists. Whereas the black museums wouldn't necessarily want the works of artists of European descent.

SMITH: That actually moves us on to the next big area I wanted to talk about, which



concerns efforts to open up the so-called mainstream museums so that they actually represent the total culture. It sounds like it's an ongoing process and it probably always feels like you're at step one or at step two. Of course, even when you were a student at Hampton you could find one or two pieces by African American artists in major museums.

LEWIS: Right, Tanners, and Pippins, and [William] Edmondsons.

SMITH: Here in LA you were involved in the picketing at LACMA. I gather the impetus for that came from Claude Booker and Cecil [Ferguson].

LEWIS: No, the impetus did not come from Claude Booker and Cecil, it came from Dr. Alfred Cannon, who was a psychiatrist at UCLA. He's the one who organized the picketing, and he was a good friend of Leon Banks; he met Leon at the picketing.

Leon was on the Contemporary Arts Council. Dr. Cannon was a good friend of the president of the board over at LACMA, who was head of the *LA Times*.

SMITH: Oh, Franklin Murphy.

LEWIS: Franklin Murphy just about called him in and said, in so many words, "Boy, I don't know why you didn't tell me that you were going to do this." And Mrs. Anna Bing Arnold tried to talk him out of it, but he was very steadfast. Bernie Casey was in it, and John Outterbridge, and E. J. Montgomery. So that was the first picket line. I don't know when Claude and the others had a picket line.

SMITH: Well, did either Franklin Murphy or Anna Bing Arnold promise to do



anything that might change the situation?

LEWIS: No.

SMITH: They were both in a position where they had some power and some influence.

LEWIS: I think Mrs. Arnold gave the museum at least a million dollars every year. She gave them a lot of money. And she said that she didn't know much about art, but the "boys" did.

SMITH: Meaning Maurice Tuchman?

LEWIS: Maurice Tuchman, primarily. I think Maurice was chief curator of contemporary art or something then. Kenneth Donahue, the director, and Stead, the deputy director, were out in left field someplace. They didn't know much about anything, but they were nice people. Mrs. Arnold and I used to have breakfast at least once a week, over at Perino's, and she would come by in her Bentley and pick me up. She couldn't drive, but I just thought I'd take my chances anyway. I talked her into getting advice from William Fagg, who was still alive at that time about buying a Benin bronze. She bought it and paid \$25,000 for it; it was a magnificent piece. And they refused it over at the museum. They chastised her and said, "When you get ready to buy some art, buy some real art, not this kind of stuff." At the same time they were housing part of the Wellcome Collection from UCLA, and that's all they wanted, they didn't want anything else.





They really must have lectured to her, because soon after that we were talking about the Black Arts Council and black art, and jazz and so forth, and Mrs. Arnold said to me, "I don't know what you black people are talking about with "black" art and "black" music; everybody knows that Paul Whiteman invented jazz. She was going by that period, *le jazz*, you know, in the twenties? That was for her what jazz was about, and Paul Whiteman was the instigator of it and we had no right to claim any of it. But she was out of it, and she was just helpless with the people at the museum. She just gave them money and said, "I don't know what you're supposed to do or what you're supposed to buy." I convinced her that she should put up money for children of color to come to the children's workshop. She gave me \$60,000 for that, but I could not get her to interfere with what the "boys " were doing and thinking. Who was the other person you asked about?

SMITH: Oh, Franklin Murphy.

LEWIS: When we had the Museum of African American Art, he did invite our board up to the Times Mirror, to tell us something about the responsibility of a board, and organizational things. But he was instrumental in closing down all the avenues that we had for PR when we were picketing.

[Tape XII, Side Two]

LEWIS: I think the only African American artist in the Franklin Murphy sculpture garden at UCLA is Richard Hunt. He was not at all open. When we had these



programs at the museum for kids, Murphy was saying we should bring them out of Watts and put them someplace like Beverly Hills or Westwood, where they could "lift themselves up by their bootstraps." He implied that that was the only way that they were going to become culturally enriched or culturally proficient in any way. No, he was not any help.

SMITH: What about your relationships with the Pasadena Art Museum when it was focused on contemporary art, before it became the Norton Simon [Museum of Art], and also MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]?

LEWIS: Curtis Tan was over there when it was the Pasadena Art Museum. I knew Curtis and I used to go over there to the enamel workshop, but I didn't really know the people there.

SMITH: John Outterbridge worked there as a preparator, or I forget exactly what, but something along those lines, for about two or three years.

LEWIS: Yes, and I got the impression that they were more open than this museum over here, than LACMA.

SMITH: What about MOCA? What efforts have you been involved with to make sure that MOCA addresses diversity issues?

LEWIS: I'm working on it. I'm working on it through one of my students, who is a very good friend of the director. I had lunch with him about two months ago. They have bought some works by Afro-Caribbean artists. And of course they had the



Betye Saar show many years ago. They have had a number of major displays and works by African Americans. But they are highly contemporary; you have to just feed them those kinds of things, and they are rather receptive. I think they just hired a new curator, who seems to be helping them to diversify. She's a graduate of Scripps, but she worked in SoHo before coming to MOCA. I think there's much more hope for them. I see much more hope. I'm going to stay friendly and see if I can't make some difference, and my student will help me. She's rather aggressive.

SMITH: This is Susan [Anderson]?

LEWIS: Yes. Susan can be aggressive.

SMITH: Well, she gets things done.

LEWIS: That's what I mean. So, between the two of us I think we can persuade the director Richard Koshalek, to diversify their collection and their shows. I have given him the *Caribbean Visions* book, so we're working on it.

SMITH: Oh, to see if they might be a venue for it?

LEWIS: No, they're too small really. I mean, that's a hundred works. Of course, they could cut back on some of it, but it's going to be at Long Beach, anyway. But no, I just wanted him to look at some of the artists in there and think about maybe getting a few things, which he's seriously considering—or getting a donor to buy a few of those things.

SMITH: Now, what about a place like the Getty? Now, the museum doesn't collect





twentieth-century art, and it doesn't collect American art, but—

LEWIS: They did have the Carrie Mae Weems show in the old Getty, but it was photographs.

SMITH: They do collect photography.

LEWIS: She didn't work directly on the prints but she embellished them with lettering on acetate that was placed over the print. Did you see that show?

SMITH: I didn't see it.

LEWIS: It was highly successful, folks just flooded to it. So they really have broken their rules.

SMITH: But photography is something that they do work in and then the Getty Research Institute [for the History of Art and the Humanities] does these little shows of contemporary artists.

LEWIS: I know. They had Noah [Purifoy] in one of those up there at one point. The space that they have it in is not the best.

SMITH: I suppose up on the hill [the new Getty Center] they will now have a gallery; it won't just be in the hallway. But here we have an institution that's worth billions of dollars, that does stuff all over the world, but aside from really sort of ancillary things, they're not going to deal with African American art because they don't deal with American art, period. How do you see working with an institution like the Getty to make it more responsive to diverse communities?



LEWIS: I started on them when I gave my lecture on Barthé. It wasn't just Barthé I was talking to them about. Unfortunately, many of the persons who should have been there were in Italy or someplace, but I think the word got back to them. I suggested that they could begin collecting African American art and placing it in the environment, and that would be a good start.

I also criticized severely their lackadaisical attitude about African American art in terms of the education program—most of the works are less than mediocre. I asked if that was because they didn't care, or because they don't know. They are always talking about judging on the basis of quality. Okay, the quality depends on your perspective, but there *is* a universal kind of organized situation that can result in quality. If you build a house, you've got to have some kind of structure. No matter what that art says, whether it's minimal or whatever it is, you do it well, whatever you're doing. Let's get the top artists, and not just buy raggedy stuff. I just told them I thought it was criminal what they were putting out there as art-historical examples for the children, and they should have been more careful.

But I also moved into how they could collect African American art, and as with LACMA, I told them that if they didn't want to have a major show by Jacob Lawrence and Bearden and so forth, they could have installations. Begin that way, you're safe. Of course, [LACMA] didn't even want to do that. They still have no Beardens or Lawrences in the collection. But the Getty can collect without changing



its policy, and I'm going to keep saying that to them. I've talked with Salvatore Settis, the director of the research institute, about it too. I don't know what kind of influence he has, but I couldn't speak to everyone, because being in that scholar program, you're limited in terms of who you can get to. But I suspect word does get back somehow to somebody. I gave them a list of a hundred black voices—people who have some clout and who have the money; they're well-heeled people who wouldn't mind speaking out, so the Getty has those people on their list to invite them to different things.

SMITH: One of the things the research institute can do is collect papers and centralize the archives of artists, as you're doing with the Richmond Barthé papers—you hope.

LEWIS: Yes, I'm sure they're going to take them. I got kind of pissed off with them and said, "Don't be snobbish, don't act so crazy with me. I know these papers are some of the best you are going to get of that period."

SMITH: You advised the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden], but what about the Whitney [Museum of American Art], or the Museum of Modern Art?

LEWIS: The only thing I've done at the Whitney was to picket it, in the early seventies; that was with Benny Andrews. They had a little gallery where they put all the black artists; they didn't integrate them in with the other artists at that time. I'm trying to think of the man who was the curator. When they did have a major show,





they left out most of the really fine artists. Also, they had a Jacob Lawrence show, around twenty-five years ago. I have the catalog for it. I think they had a student from Columbia University write the catalog, and it was maybe six pages, or something of that sort, and we were a little upset by that. They didn't show any respect for even people like Jake. So Benny Andrews organized the picketing, and I've almost forgotten the specifics of why, but I have the records on it.

I was surprised when they appointed Benny head of the Visual Arts Program at the National Endowment, because he had done so many things that would be considered as anti-establishment—without appearing so . . . but he's a very strong person. He's now saying he's making a lot of money, and he never expected to make money, he just didn't. But he still shows mostly in African American art galleries, even though he's making money. A lot of artists don't do that; when they begin showing in the "white" galleries, they divorce themselves from that African American past, and they don't even put it on their résumés. I've seen this happen; I've followed some of this. They just want to lose that identity, and some of the women divorce themselves from showing in "women's" shows, because they don't want to be "classified" as a woman artist.

SMITH: Well, I think at least for the time being I've run out of things to ask you, but you may have a few more things you want to say before we wrap up for today.

LEWIS: I just talked to Elizabeth about an hour ago, and I remember something that



we used to go around and say to artists who didn't see themselves as black artists.

We used to propose these questions: Were you an artist first, or were you a human being, a person? If you were a person, what were you? When you became an artist, did you lose your identity? It's still going on, that controversy, and I guess that's why some artists still want to divorce themselves. I don't think you ought to go around saying, "I'm a white artist," or, "I'm a black artist," necessarily, but you can't hide the fact that you're a black artist, and you don't *have* to hide the fact that you're a white artist, because in *this* country that's who the artists are, and that's who the citizens are. So that's still a controversy.

There ought to be some discussion on this, because I know that a lot of people who are being more fully accepted today are so because they are good artists, but they're also African American artists, and they are living on the backs of the struggles of a lot of these folks who identify as African Americans and who opened the doors for them to be the people who, unfortunately, are denying their heritage. Not by what they make, but by what they voice. And it doesn't help those kids who come along. There are many of them who go to these museums, and they say, "I can't be an artist, because they can't find themselves in anything they're seeing. I don't think people ought to go around labeling, but . . . Barthé is over there in LACMA as an American artist, which is fine, but most of the kids will look at this and say, "Well, here's a white man who made a black figure." There ought to be something on the



wall or in a pamphlet someplace that says, "This is an artist of African descent." So that's an education program I'm talking about. There has to be some way to reach out to let those kids know that this is possible.

That identification is nothing to be embarrassed by. *Art* is not that *great*. I mean, the Greeks are *Greek* artists, and the Romans are *Roman* artists. And we know that when we say, "American art," we know generally that we're not talking about *us* [African American artists]. Now, it might be that in the future we could be talking about us, but now we know we're not talking about us. So what do we do, where do we go? I happen to believe that like the people in Surinam, you can maintain your identity and still have great value. I don't think being an African American artist takes anything away from me. I think it adds to what people understand about me. So I see no point in all this amalgamation. I mean, people can marry whom they want, they can sleep with whom they want, but the identification of a base, if it's vertical, to a large extent, in terms of culture, will be understood by people, and they will then learn to respect it because you respect it. Do you know what I'm trying to say?

I think it's been a serious mistake, trying to make people follow each other's group patterns. Learn to respect them and understand them much as possible, but you don't have to be white, and white people don't have to be black to be nice people, to be good people, to be people who will exchange things with me. That's like my friend Dr. Grimes. I knew he was a southerner, and I knew he had great prejudice,





but I also understood that it was taught, he learned it, and he was struggling with it, trying to understand who these black people were—and he was a Ph.D. So that's all I could ask of him. I learned from him and he learned from me, and we ended up the best of friends—there were differences, but we were the best of friends. I'd like to see more of that in the art world, where you don't have to be a member of my group to appreciate what I'm doing, nor is it necessary for me to be a member of your group to appreciate what you are doing. Differences should be recognized and appreciated.



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